CRUISING WONDERLAND

queer reparative aesthetics within scenographic photography

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Tasmania
June 2018

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my team of supervisors that came and went at various stages on this journey, Dr Maria Kunda, Dr Matt Delbridge, Dr Svenja Kratz and Dr Troy Ruffels, each of you has had a significant impact upon both me and my project, and for that I give each of you a heartfelt thank you.

To the one constant throughout my journey, the reason I upped sticks and moved to Tasmania, the most generous, inspiring and fiercely intelligent supervisor I could have ever wished for - Professor Dorita Hannah I say kia ora, šukran ktīr and thank you… for everything.

I could not have completed this journey without the constant guidance, love, support and belief of my partner Grant Hall who has been, for want of a better cliché, my rock. Thank you for agreeing to go on this journey with me, promise I'll do the same for you.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this PhD to my father Terry Coyle (1939-2016) who I lost mid way through this project. He was one of the most intelligent, entertaining and creative men you would ever want to meet and I miss him every day.

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ABSTRACT

CRUISING WONDERLAND refers to a specific 'beat' site in Sydney associated with illicit encounters and the homophobic violence it engendered during the 1980s, as well as an embodied means of re-presenting such traumatic histories. As practice-based research, it examines how traditionally representational forms of photography and scenography can inform each other through the more performative mode of 'scenographic photography': an interdisciplinary neologism operating between the performing, spatial and visual arts. Influenced by performance design, in which scenography operates within an expanded field, this new presentational mode impacts on the creation and exhibition of photography: calling upon the audience to abandon familiar means of experiencing and engaging with the conventional gallery setting. An exploration of the varying modalities of presentation, representation and re-presentation, as well as viewing, witnessing and experiencing, leads to new visceral and embodied engagement between spectators and artworks by encouraging audiences to move through and pause within deliberately staged environments: to cruise wonderland.

The performative nature of 'scenographic photography' is here utilised as a creative method to explore and represent sites of historic queer trauma in an attempt to garner a deeper understanding of our violent, homophobic histories, occurring especially in and against the 'beat' spaces used for male sexual encounters within Australia and New Zealand. These often clandestine, nocturnal spaces of erotic desire, and the violence they elicit, are further investigated through 'darkness' (metaphorical, physical and conceptual) as a queer aesthetic strategy for highlighting issues of damage, trauma, violence and shame as applied to the production and staging of 'scenographic

photography'. This calls on Susan Best's notion of 'reparative aesthetics' as a performative means for re-presenting sites of historic homophobic violence whilst attempting to avoid the negative and distancing effects of 'pity' and 'shame' in the act of witnessing. Within *Cruising Wonderland* scenographic scale-model making is adopted as a critical tool with which to interrogate the chosen sites, where the inherent 'wonder' and fascination associated with the art of the miniature allow for the possibility of a reparative reading not always possible via the explicit documentary tradition of photographing sites of trauma.

Situating this project and its individual photographs within the larger collective framework of performance design allows the body of work to become, in the tradition of post-dramatic theatre and expanded scenography, a performed 'visual text'. This calls upon and queers the Christian tradition of walking the 'Stations of the Cross' by inviting participants to sequentially move from image site to image site: pausing, reflecting and passing on, in order to elicit an embodied and empathic response to the exhibited photographs.

At the heart of this exploration are the hidden narratives of hundreds of Australasian men who were beaten and/or murdered because of their perceived otherness. *Cruising Wonderland* attempts to both define and employ 'scenographic photography' as an emergent field, here creating awareness of selected sites of homophobic violence within New Zealand and Australia. The audience are required to 'cruise' the darkened exhibition environment, like the 'beat' spaces referenced in the work, with an acute sensory awareness of their surroundings, of fellow spectators and how they, as participants within Wonderland, perform and are perceived by others. This immersive approach to engaging with the work is designed to encourage a

process of empathic engagement, illuminating often-invisible histories, allowing us to move towards reparation through active re-witnessing. *Cruising Wonderland* is a memorial to queer suffering.

PART I

INTRODUCTION

STATION 1
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

> Ultimately, photography is subversive, not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks. (Barthes 1979, p. 38)

> … a dream world, a world of magic and ritual, yet there are images there of the burning cars and radar systems, which remind you there is a price to be paid in order to gain this dream in the face of a world of violence. (Jarman 1985)

Cruising Wonderland is a practice-based research project that develops an interdisciplinary approach to operating between the performing, spatial and visual arts. The title has multifaceted significance in relation to this PhD project. Wonderland, in referencing Lewis Carroll's 1865 novel, alludes to the curious land of wonder that Alice encounters when she journeys down the rabbit hole. This 'down the rabbit hole' metaphor, as an entering into the unknown, is an apt one when pursuing a practice-based research journey where, like Alice, all manner of temptation, confusion, elation and danger await around each bend. Since this project is concerned with finding a new spatial way of engaging spectator/audience with the presentation of photography, the inherent spatiality within the term Wonderland (land of wonder) allows for a new scenographic thinking to emerge. Taking inspiration from Rancière the term encourages a return to childhood curiosity and playfulness, to potentially 'emancipate' spectator from passive observer to active participant.

> It should call for spectators who are active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it. (Ranciere 2007, p. 280)

Of significance also to this project, which uses locations of homophobic violence as a means of exploring the concept of 'scenographic photography', is the Bondi Sydney site of the failed colonial endeavour, Wonderland City, an open-air amusement park (1906–1911). During the mid-20th century the surrounding locale of what was once Wonderland City became a well-known and frequented 'beat' (a site for men cruising for sex). Throughout the 1980s this area hosted an epidemic of homophobic violence with gangs of youths entertaining themselves through the blood sport of 'poofter bashing' and a number of men 'disappeared' with many thrown from the surrounding cliffs to their deaths (Feneley 2013). By introducing the term 'cruising' into the title, I am firmly placing this research within a queer context. Like Alice who, while cruising through Wonderland, is constantly being tempted (often succumbing to her desires despite the danger), this research encourages the reader/spectator to 'cruise' my Wonderland.

Within this research I link the act of cruising with how a participant may move through exhibited scenographic space.[1] In both examples the individual moves through space with an acute awareness of their surroundings, the proximity of other people, sound, smell, how the self performs when being watched and an awareness of potential hazards/danger. In exploring this concept of scenographic space I refer to recent emerging definitions of scenography, conventionally set design, and in particular its exploration outside the theatre to ascertain how this 'expanded' concept (Brejzek 2011, McKinney/Palmer 2017) can be utilised in the creative production and presentation of photography.

[1] The term scenography is derived from the Greek 'skēnē' meaning scene or stage and 'grapho'

> Scenography is not a setting that illustrates our actions anymore – it is a body (a discipline, a method, a foundation) in its own right. It is a discipline that has its own logic, its own distinctive rules. (Lotker & Gough 2013, p. 3)

In widely applying the term scenography within my research I am aware that a clear, succinct and commonly used definition of the word does not necessarily exist. Until recent times it was predominately associated with theatrical staging and design.[2] In his text *Looking into the abyss*, Arnold Aronson advocates for the use of the term scenography over design as he believes:

> ... it carries a connotation of an all encompassing visual-spatial construct as well as the process of change and transformation that is a physical vocabulary of the stage. (Aronson 2005, p. 7)

Pamela Scorzin, and many other contemporary scholars,[3] challenge this paradigm by defining contemporary scenography as a 'highly interdisciplinary, transgeneric, intermedial, crossmodal and polysensual' approach to creating and staging 'events' (Scorzin 2011, pp. 259-260). Corresponding to Scorzin and Aronson, this research identifies scenography as an 'all-encompassing visual-spatial and temporal construct' that, like installation art, places different media and practices in dialogue with each other. Within *Cruising Wonderland* these characteristics of scenography are taken out of the theatre and applied to the creation and 'staging' of a body of photographs.

[2] Pamela Howard in her 2002 book *What is scenography?* does not really deviate from the theatrecentric view that scenography only exists within the confines of performance making withinthe confines of the theatre.
[3] See Brejzek, Hannah, McKinney/Palmer, McKinney/Butterworth, Lotker/Gough et al.

In staging my series of photographic works within a scenographic framework I question how the photo image can be experienced and engaged with in ways that the traditional gallery presentation (work hung on white walls) does not allow for. Dorita Hannah, in exploring the abject womb-like qualities of the black-box theatre, describes the white-walled space as:

> White, in all its crispness, is the defining 'colour' of the modern movement, representing cleanliness, neutrality and an attempt to keep the nightmare of decay and mortality [from] returning to its surfaces … the black-box signifies an excess of representation, conjuring up the nightmare the white wall seeks to cover over. (Hannah 2003)

In taking the work off the walls and requiring the spectator to engage with exhibited works in a more complex spatial and physical manner, the neutrality and cleanliness prescribed by the white walls is challenged and the audience are automatically displaced from their natural art-viewer default settings. Within Wonderland, the nightmares of decay and mortality are welcome components. This physical shift in the viewing paradigm allows for the potential to see and experience things in a more visceral fashion when the work is theatricalised through the incorporation of scenographic tools. Scenography thus allows me to explore the relationships between viewing, witnessing and experiencing.

The contextual basis for the creation of this research and body of creative work is the exploration of sites of queer trauma. In utilising scenography as a means to encourage spectators to become active participants within the experiential, polysensual staging of re-presentations of sites of historic homophobic violence, I am encouraging the potential for a deeper

understanding that may not be possible within the traditional white walls of the gallery with the lack of audience agency that is afforded. Within my Wonderland the audience become critical components to the dramaturgy of the event, moving in and around the photographs, projecting their own reflections within the work whilst experiencing the multiple reflections of the works themselves, thus allowing for a personal experience of the photographic installation. In most exhibitions of two-dimensional art, a natural spectator journey is suggested through the hanging of singular works along a horizon line in which viewers move from one image to the next. This tradition is often linked to the work of Alfred H Barr and Phillip Johnson at MoMA in the late 1920s and 1930s where the standard museum practice of stacking individual works in a 'salon' style was radically altered and they began showing work within a singular line on a neutral painted cloth backed wall (Hugendubel 2010). When the wall is removed, viewers are empowered by an increase in spatial options. They have the freedom to decide how and to where they move and are encouraged by the exhibition design to take a less linear narrative reading of the installation. Their movement within the space becomes a critical aspect of not just how they engage with the work but also how others within the shared space experience it.

Cruising Wonderland draws upon Eve Sedgwick's concept of 'reparative reading' (Sedgwick, EK 2003) and Susan Best's 'reparative aesthetics' (Best 2016) to propose a framework for creating work that aims to acknowledge and begin to heal the dark histories of these various chosen sites of queer trauma through a particular mode of visual engagement. In her book, *Reparative aesthetics: witnessing in contemporary art photography*, Best questions how art (and in particular photography) can be used to begin to

highlight and heal historic shame, guilt and trauma. In an interview with *Das Superpaper* magazine she succinctly describes the counterproductive effects that 'shame' itself can have in the witnessing of art:

> I think shame is a necessary part of viewing art that exposes issues and injustices, even when the events are in the distant past. When people with a social conscience see images that recall the degradation suffered by others, most likely they will feel pity and shame. But shame can lead to a withdrawal from the issues at hand; it can block witnessing/hearing. Or worse, the denial of shame can lead to ressentiment: distancing by taking a morally superior position in the present that refuses to acknowledge the continuing operation of 'our dark side'. (Moody 2013, p. 28)

This body of photographic work utilises the crossmodal and highly performative discipline of scenography as a way of countering this potential for withdrawal or distancing that Best speaks of. The scenographic tools of light, sound, space and body, when utilised consecutively, allow for the photograph to become more than just the singular still image on a wall to be looked at and contemplated from a comfortable viewing distance. The 'theatricalisation' of the exhibition space forces the participants out of their preconceived art-viewing comfort zone and allows for a new and potentially reparative embodied encounter to occur.

STATION 2
DEFINING SCENOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHY

A significant contribution of this research project to new knowledge is its attempt to establish, unpack and define the ambiguous terminology of 'scenographic photography': a term sometimes used to describe both the American school of (mostly) Yale-based 'staged photographers' from the early 2000s (most notably Gregory Crewdson and Philip-Lorca diCorcia) (Wiley 2011) and also to describe scale model photographer James Casebere (Celeste 2001).

The act of cleanly defining the distinct characteristics of what may constitute 'scenographic photography' is potentially as problematic as the multiple and varied definitions of the term scenography. Initial attempts to define the intermedial qualities of what is 'scenographic photography' raise the following possibilities which I have categorised under the following descriptors which Dorita Hannah and Sven Mehzoud (2001) use within their analysis of the exhibiting of performance:

PRESENTATION

Presentation exists as both an action (e.g. delivery of information / entertainment, imparting of a gift) and a thing (occuring event). The 'presentation' is concerned with making-present in the moment of reception (e.g. a performance or exhibited object in a gallery).

REPRESENTATION

Representation, like presentation, is also an act, which performs as a surrogate for the absent original. This can be achieved (especially within

design) as a pre-making (proposed performance) and re-making (as substitute for performances gone). Representation involves a simulated presence, which in some way represents a 'reality'.

RE-PRESENTATION

Re-presentation or (re)presentation is a hybrid term that moves between the presentational action and the representational simulation. In re-presentation the simulated 'ideal' is destabilised thus making it performative when it is re-imagined as an original artefact.

Photography has traditionally, (mostly) existed as a representational artform. It is still common for people to equate what they see within a photograph with being an accurate representation of that which is real. My exploration of 'scenographic photography' then looks to how the presentational, representational and re-presentational begin to move the photographic image into new scenographic territory.

Within the following sub-headings I begin to categorise and define some possibilities and variables that may fall under the larger umbrella definition of 'scenographic photography'.

PHOTOGRAPHY & SCENOGRAPHY AS MIMETIC *REPRESENTATIONS*

Photography, especially in the performing arts, tends to be a representational tool. There is a pervasive tradition within the theatre, dance and opera industries of photographing a staged rehearsal of the production principally for archival, documentation and publicity purposes. Having been a scenographer/theatre designer for over 20 years, I, like many other creative practitioners, am often left uninspired by the art of

'live' theatre photography. Professional productions tend to hire a photographer to document the performance, with the primary focus on the actors and their affective staged presence. In such photography, the production design is treated as secondary and often overlooks the spatiovisual narrative. Exceptions to this tend to be scenographers who photograph their own theatrical performances: approaching the visual documentation in a more empathetic and nuanced manner, given their investment in the visual narrative presented, than the commercial photographer adept at composition and capturing 'moments'. Flemish scenographer Jan Versweyveld is as an excellent example of this. Since 2005 he has occupied the position of resident scenographer and in-house photographer for the acclaimed theatre company Toneelgoep, Amsterndam. His familiarity with the work, its spatiality and various collaborators, allows for fewer prescribed archival images to emerge. The primary difference between traditional theatre photography and the new approach of artists like Versweyveld is that the commercial theatre photographer is always attempting to capture someone else's vision, often, through a lack of understanding/familiarity with the content, to generic effect. Versweyveld, and other performance makers/designers who photograph, bring with them to the process of capturing images of a production, a developed conceptual framework for the understanding of the visual narrative presented on stage. They bring an intimate understanding of the intermedial integration of lighting, projection and scenic elements of which a commercial photographer will never be able to fully grasp.

Image subject to copyright

Fig.1. Jan Versweyveld, *A View From the Bridge: Lyceum Theatre New York* (2015)

Fig.2. Jan Versweyveld, *Song From Far Away: Young Vic Theatre London* (2015)

Fig.1. and Fig.2. demonstrate Versweyveld's inherent understanding of the spatial relationships presented on stage; challenging the frontality of two-dimensional representation. His strong, angular architectural scenography becomes an integral component of the images and express the spectator's dynamic experience. The focus on the actors' 'performance' is not the primary motivation behind the image, rather the performer becomes a part of the scenography. The following image (Fig.3.) of a recent production I designed (Lisa Harrow in *At The Wake*) exemplifies this relationship between performer and space by integrating body, light and setting within an enclosing darkness that defies the frame and encourages a closeup and more immersive view as experienced by spectator, albeit from a distant seat.

This form of representational photography, representing that which has been, can have a performative quality when 'presented' within an immersive environment like gallery or museum. The image then immerses the viewer and places them within the role of active spectator or audience member observing a new dynamic and spatially engaged experience which shifts its position from being purely representational.

Fig.3. Sean Coyle, *At the Wake: Circa Theatre Wellington* (2018)

In her essay 'Cut, click, shudder: the "document performance"', performance theorist Rebecca Schneider questions the habit of thinking of a photograph of a 'live' event as a trace, remnant or death as expounded by other theorists like Roland Barthes. She asks if this way of thinking limits our ability to experience the photograph itself as event/performance:

> Does this way of thinking about photography limit our access to a photograph as event – as a performance of duration – taking place 'live' in an ongoing scene of circulation, re-circulation, encounter, re-encounter, and collaborative exchange with viewers, reviewers, reenactors, re-performers, re-photographers? (Schneider 2007, p. 34)

Throughout this research I have been questioning if and how performance and scenography can exist within the confines of the creation and presentation of still images. The results of this practice-based enquiry draw upon Dorita Hannah and Sven Mehzoud's assertion that in

'exhibiting' performance I am inviting an audience to share contested space and make meaning, thus rendering my work not 'something other than performance', but an 'other' performance (Hannah & Mehzoud 2011, p.112).

This 'other' performance within my research is exhibited through the exploration of the performative (presentational) quality of photography (representational) through its activation through scenographic presentation.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS SCENOGRAPHIC *PRESENTATION* WITHIN PERFORMANCE

This second possibility considers whether the term 'scenographic photography' may refer to photographic work that is presented within scenographic/performance environments. By presenting photography in immersive environments that require us to negotiate the work actively with our entire bodies do we then not take on a more performative role as spectators when we step into the playing space and activate the scenography? Harriet Hawkins from the University of London has described it as 'not one looking at or into a frame, but rather being within that frame', thus becoming an 'engaged practice' where the artist and participant enter into a dialogue (Thompson 2016). A recent example of this is the exhibition *Détour,* curated and designed by New Zealand conceptual artist Michael Parekowhai as an alternative way of encountering and experiencing, within the new visual arts wing of Te Papa Tongarewa (Museum of New Zealand). Within this constructed space of scaffolding partially dressed in plastic tree trunks, Parekowhai encourages

the spectator to engage with and experience his own work as well as those borrowed and from the Te Papa collection – such as Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Colin McCahon, Christo and Jeanne-Claude – in alternative ways to the traditional presentation of work within a 'national gallery'.

In this example Parekowhai utilises the exhibition as an event (presentational) allowing the (representational) artifacts / photographs to 'perform' in unexpected ways.

Image subject to copyright

Fig.4. Michael Parekowhai, *Détour: detail* (2018) mixed-media installation

Moving through Parekowhai's constructed forest, a collection of Theo Schoon's photographs are presented so that the spectator experiences not just the image but is invited to look around and behind them. In this scenographic presentation, the backs of frames are given an equal significance to the photographic image: thereby presenting the image as a discrete and dynamic object amongst others. The staging devices, which Parekowhai uses, encourage the 'active' spectator to consider the

institutional hierarchical relationships generally placed on 'works of value'. In moving through his 'playground' the presented works reveal themselves as more than individual art objects and begin a dialogue with other works and spectators in new and unusual ways. The audience strolls through the trees and discovers both explicit and hidden treasures. My experience within this presentation was in the witnessing of audience of all ages embrace the playfulness the artist encourages. Experiencing small and intimate works within the much larger framework of its potentially overpowering presentation instead encouraged a contemplation and questioning which might never have occurred if the work was shown in a traditional gallery/museum paradigm. In a similar way, the work of Christian Boltanski may fall within this subgroup of (representational) photography that is exhibited within a constructed scenographic world (presentational).

Fig.5. Christian Boltanski, *Chance* (2014) mixed-media installation

Within the presentational model of 'scenographic photography', where images fit within a larger spatiovisual and temporal construct, it is worth noting the intermedial qualities it shares with 'digital scenography' where still and moving image photography and digital art are projected within a performance environment, often as a replacement to the traditional painted and constructed scenographic elements. This term relates to the technological shift that has taken place within performance, often called the 'scenographic turn', where the effects of digital technologies and the move away from mechanical processes has led to new ways of creating and presenting performance spaces.

When looking at the 'scenographic turn' it is worth considering Aronson's view of the problematic relationship between performance, theatre practice and media technology he discusses in 'Can theater and media speak the same language?' (Aronson 2005); an essay where he asserts that the uncomfortable union between live performance and projected media due to essentially speaking two disparate languages. Aronson is sceptical that these two languages can co-exist unless the intention is to either explore their dislocation and disjunction or to comment on the cultural significance of visual technology in our media-saturated world. While Aronson's views here hold some weight within the more traditional, theatre scenography world, where the two mediums tend to sit uncomfortably and create an unconscious barrier between audience and performer connection, his views are now problematic as they assume a hierarchical starting point rather than an 'intermedial' approach within a post-digital paradigm where all elements can combine effects to varying affect. Aronson's binary assumes the theatre performance with its material representation of body, prop and backdrop as the base (the pure art) and

that this is somehow upset by the addition of media technology. A question that then arises within my research is how a hierarchical shift within this traditional way of thinking can result in a more 'bilingual' unification (rather than binary opposition) of performance and media? If the media is the base starting point, how can performance fit within this? If media and performance are equal in stature, can this then lead to not two separate languages but instead a new, performative pidgin language? Can this then allow for the exhibiting and performing of transmedial works which are neither subservient to the traditional theatrical or museum presentation paradigms? Aronson himself acknowledges this shifting focus, and the potential of scenography, media and performance, albeit as a 'crisis', in a later essay, 'The power of space in a virtual world':

> In recent years, scenographic and performative borders have shifted in ways so profound as to call into question the very notion of theatre and performance as it has been understood for over 2,500 years. The old designations of theatre, auditorium, two- and three-dimensional images, physical framing, and real time and space, have been perforated, stretched, fractured, and dissolved. We are facing a crisis – albeit an exciting one – brought about by digital technology. (Aronson 2008, p. 23)

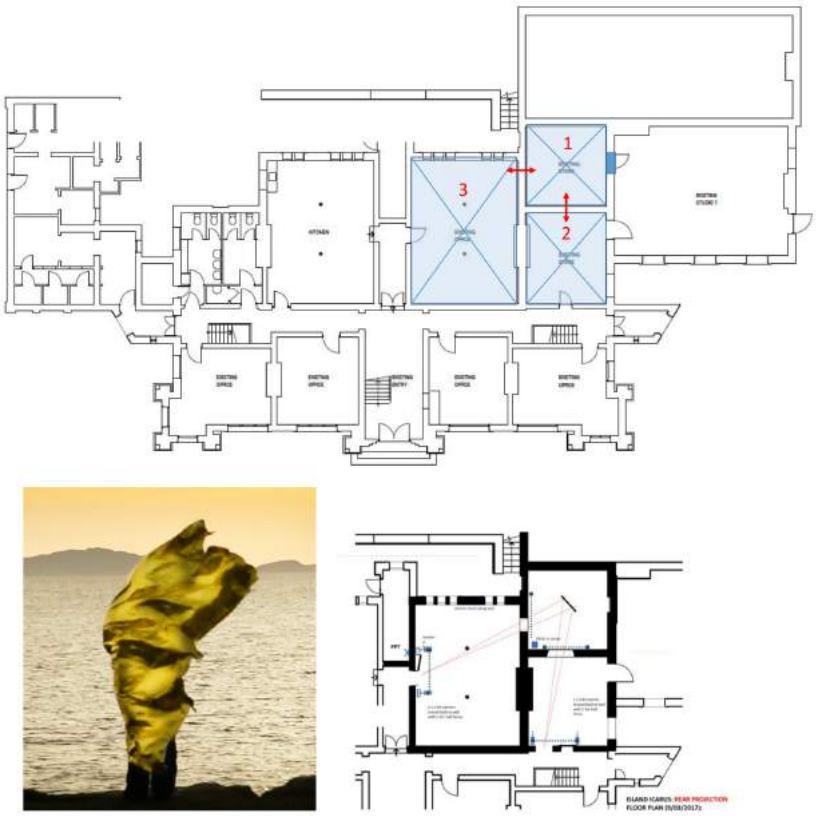
These presentational issues were explored collaboratively with Dorita Hannah when we were invited to create a work for the *Remanence* exhibition at Domain House in Hobart as part of the 10 Days on the Island Arts Festival in Tasmania (March 2017) and themed on how fire shapes landscape and psyche. We utilized the exhibition as an opportunity to address issues of Australian offshore island detention centres, incarcerating refugees and asylum seekers attempting to enter the 'lucky country' by boat, with particular emphasis on those self-harming as a means of protest. The work pays homage to Omid Masoumali, Iranian

asylum seeker, detained by the Australian government on Nauru who, in a desperate attempt at having his (and other detainees') voices heard, set fire to himself whilst being videoed. He died two days later in a Brisbane hospital after initially not receiving adequate medical attention. The presented work *Island Icarus (for Omid Masoumali)* used the tragic myth of Icarus who flew too close to the sun, in turn melting his wings and thus plummeting to his death. The image of Icarus, often represented in art as a flaming figure falling into the Mediterranean, held specific poignancy given its contemporary history as a necessary passage of water for refugees and asylum seekers. The detaining practices of Nauru and Manus Islands became an integral aspect of how we scenographically dealt with the environment, which encompassed two rooms adjoining a third smaller space with a dirt floor that could also be viewed from above. Utilising the digital scenographic tools of projected video and sound we presented the image of a figure in the distant room: standing on a clifftop and wrapped in a crackling wind-whipped gold emergency blanket, which we had recorded whilst undertaking a performance workshop on Tasmania's Maria Island.[4] However, visitors to the exhibition were literally detained behind two layers of security fencing, unable to enter the rooms and only able to see the video work obstructed and in the distance. They could never get close to the work, separated by empty space in much the same way that the public/media cannot get close to the detainees on these islands. This strategy aligns with Hannah's assertion in 'Scenographic Screen Space' that:

> … the performative screen can scenographically operate alongside theatre's earth, flesh and true walls, as a spatial, social and

[4] Between June 28 and July 3, 2016 UTAS hosted the international symposium 'Intervening in the Anthropo(s)cene'. This event took place between the School of Creative Arts in Hobart and on Maria Island Tasmania and involved local and international artists, theorists, architects and designers working collaboratively to explore new ways to approach the anthropocene.

politicized element for practicing artists, to critique and engage with the pervasive geo-cultural, geo-mythical and geo-political issues of our time. (Hannah 2017, p. 40)



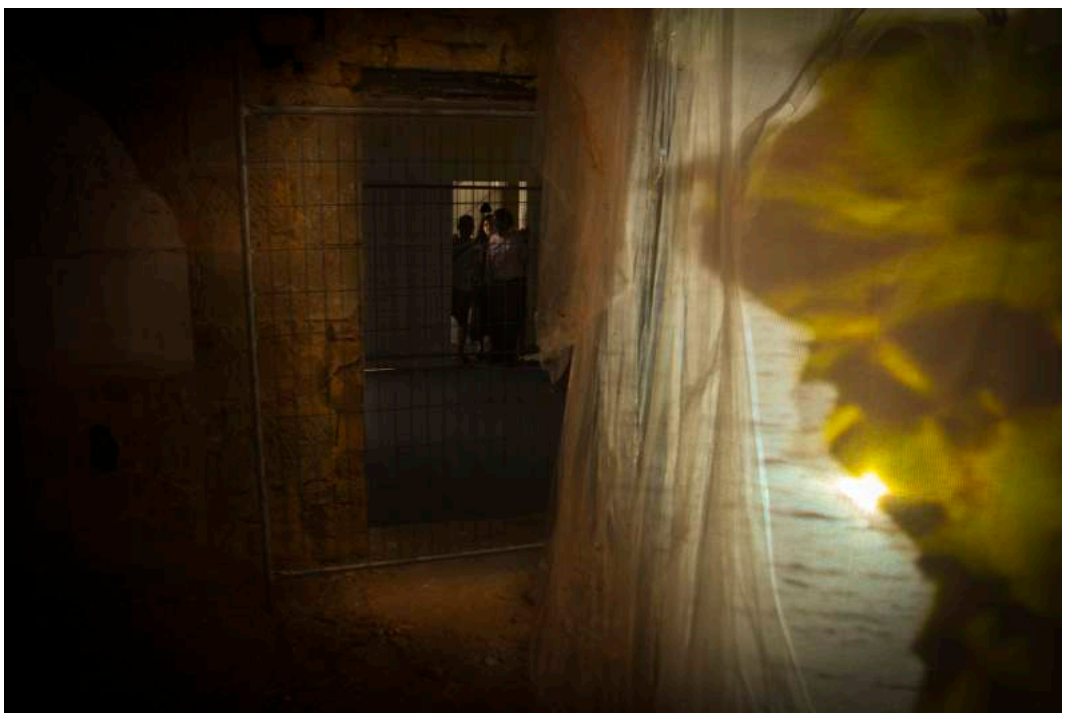


Fig.6. Sean Coyle and Dorita Hannah, *Island Icarus: for Omid Masoumali* (2017) mixed-media and digital video installation

These examples of the active 'presentation' of (representational) photography as part of a larger performative framework begin to give an understanding of the variables of scenographic photography. My research then looks to the possibilities this affords when the previously representational work is re-imagined as an original artifact destabilising the simulated ideal of its mimetic take on reality thus positioning it within a 're-presentational' framework.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS PRESENTATIONAL: *RE-PRESENTATION*

This possibility for beginning to define 'scenographic photography' looks at the artists who use scenographic tools (in particular model-making) as critical processes in their creation of photographic works. Artists like James Casebere, Oliver Boberg and Thomas Demand (amongst others) all use the scenographic disciplines of scale modeling and staged lighting to create provocative images, which re-present their three-dimensional, constructed worlds as two-dimensional artworks.

Image subject to copyright

Fig.7. James Casebere, *Monticello #3* (2001) c-print, 60.6cm x 75.9cm

Fig.8. Oliver Boberg, *Stadttunnel* (1997) c-print, 81.5cm x 128cm

Fig.9. Thomas Demand, *Copyshop* (1999) c-print, 183.5cm x 300cm

Within this mode of creating, the scenographic model moves beyond its purely representational function as miniature iteration of a larger design process, to become its own autonomous artifact. I discuss this aspect of 'scenographic photography' (and the work of Casebere, Boberg and Demand) further in upcoming chapters where I articulate how I have utilised the scale model as a discursive tool in spatially interrogating and addressing sites of historic trauma. My research examines how the model, when recorded through the medium of photography and staged lighting, becomes an uncanny re-presentation and actant in the spectator's engagement with the ambiguous, pictorial narrative presented.

The constructed model, as creative artifact, is representational. It is in some ways a mimetic simulation and stand in for the actual sites I focus on. In then taking this representational object and re-staging and imagining it (through photography) as its own presentational entity I destabilise its existence as purely representational / presentational object and instead allow it to become a re-presentational performative work which fits within the framework of 'scenographic photography'. (see Fig.10.)

Fig.10. Sean Coyle, *Inverlochy Place: diorama* (2016) pigment print, 80cm x 80cm

REPRESENTING STAGED PHOTOGRAPHY

This fourth possibility for defining 'scenographic photography' examines scenography in relation to the 'staged photograph'—a genre of contemporary art photography that is concerned with the constructed image in which the mise-en-scène is deliberately arranged to create a fictitious photographic reality (Felix, Kohler & Vowinckel 1989, p. 7). Chris Wiley in his essay 'Depth of focus' talks about an American school of 'scenographic photography' that emerged in the 2000s, partly due to the influence of Yale-based artist/teachers Gregory Crewdson and Philip-Lorca diCorcia and others like Jeff Wall (Wiley 2011, p. 84). I am left questioning whether 'scenographic' is in fact the best fit to describe these (and other) artists working within similar methodologies. A more common descriptor used when describing this genre of staged photography tends to be 'cinematic'. The aforementioned artists create still images that appear to be lifted from a movie, relying on what I refer to as the 'ambiguous narrative'. When exploring the theatrical concept of 'narrative', we are conditioned to expect movement and progression within its 'telling'. Much scenographic (or cinematic) photography discards this notion to distil these narratives into the singular image. Curator and art writer Susan Bright, in discussing the prevalence of staged photography within contemporary art, positions it within the sub-field of 'narrative photography'.

> The term 'narrative' suggests a story, and therefore movement. A story needs to progress in order to be told. At first this seems at odds with the singularity of a photographic still, but 'staged' photography distils stories into one-off images, packed full of multi-layered information. Such images function densely rather than chronologically … (Bright 2011, p. 78)

Image subject to copyright

Fig.11. Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled, Winter: Bed of Roses* (2005) c-print, 144.7cm x 223.5cm

Image subject to copyright

Fig.12. Philip Lorca-DiCorcia, *W, September 2001, #3* (2001) pigment print, 81.3cm x 106.7cm

Within Australasia and the Pacific, the narrative device of the staged photograph has provided a successful means of expressing indigenous identity and notions of decolonisation. Contemporary Aboriginal artists such as Tracey Moffatt and Christian Thomson, alongside Māori and Pacific Island counterparts, Lisa Reihana, Greg Semu and Shigeyuki Kihara in Aotearoa/New Zealand, have all successfully managed to redefine the colonial gaze by taking aspects of ethnographic photography, cinema, visual art history and popular culture to create scenographic spaces with which to allow for a new performative language to occur.

Fig.13. Shigeyuki Kihara and Sean Coyle, *Fa'a fafine: in the manner of a woman, triptych 1* (2004) c-print, 60cm x 80cm

Fig.14. Tracey Moffatt, *Something More #1* (1989) cibachrome photograph, 102.6cm x 131.7cm

Fig.15. Greg Semu, *Raft of the Tagata Pasifika* (2016) c-print, 126.5cm x 168.7cm

Within my research practice, the indigenous methodology of decolonising the staged scenographic photograph is important. It allows the possibility of exploring, through performance, visual narrative and representation,

the means to redefine the heteronormative gaze and create work that is both politicised and discursive.

Drawing from the writing of José Muñoz (Muñoz, J. 1999) and Judith Halberstam (Halberstam 2011), my own practice-based research explores the notion of queer ethnography and disidentification as a means of negotiating heteronormative culture and, in effect, allowing for the development of staged queer scenographic photographs (see Fig.16.). In *Disidentifications: queers of color and the performance of politics*, Muñoz writes about the reappropriation of cultural artefacts to serve the specific needs of the non-dominant culture:

> Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship. (Muñoz, J. 1999, p. 4)

Fig.16. Sean Coyle, *Secret Garden* (2015) digital image

Within my Wonderland, both the scenographic model and the staged photograph are given new 'disidentified' purposes as historic, queer representations of trauma. (see Fig.16.)

PRESENTATIONAL/REPRESENTATIONAL/RE-PRESENTATIONAL

As the previous sections have shown, definitions and practices of the representational, presentational and re-presentational are multiple and overlapping when it comes to application to the messy business of practice. This final proposition for the defining of 'scenographic photography' acknowledges the inherent potential of using multiples of these previously discussed possibilities to help position this emerging field operating across the spatial, visual and performing arts. It is this interdisciplinary approach to 'scenographic photography' that forms the overarching basis of my practice-based doctoral work. Throughout this exegesis I will be continuing to explore how this multifaceted approach to defining 'scenographic photography', through practice, has allowed me an appropriate methodology for producing creative work that utilises aspects of all the previous propositions I have described for defining the field.

Fig.17. Sean Coyle, *Concept drawing for Stations of Wonderland* (2018) digital image

STATIONING THE RESEARCH

This exegesis itself is structured as a visual and written narrative wherein critical aspects of the research's journey are positioned within a number of 'stations'. This draws on the etymological origins of *station*—from the Latin *stare* 'to stand' which, as with the Catholic devotional journey the Stations of the Cross, requires the visitor/worshipper to pause and contemplate the prescribed narrative 'moment'. With each station, the engaged participants bring the previous narrative moments to assist them in their understanding of the current station they occupy: a spatiotemporal experience of contemplation I attempt to create in the sectional nature of the exegesis as well as in the physical exhibiting of scenographic photography. Each section, as a 'station', allows time and space for contemplation; existing within a much larger narrative journey, establishing a standing point affecting in relation to what came before it and that which is still to come.

Within the presentation of this project, as both structured text and final installation, I employ the visual and scenographic traditions of the Catholic Church's 14 'Stations of the Cross' to further explore the reparative potential within my creative practice. Also known as the '14 stations of the sorrowful way', these series of staged moments portray Jesus on the day of his crucifixion. Presented within a church or throughout the city itself the 'stations' are positioned along a walked path, requiring the participant to actively move and pause from one station to another. Traditionally established as a means for the 'faithful' to walk its various stages, the Stations of the Cross also provide a way of eliciting a personal and empathetic response to Christ's suffering. Drawing on this medieval

theatrical tradition, this project's stations represent ritualistic, liminal space created as a performative and reflective way of engaging with the trauma and suffering of a selection of queer narratives. Within this practice-based research the Stations become a meditation on a different form of male sacrifice and suffering.

In the sections STILL THEATRE and THE BEAT GOES ON, I further explore how issues of representation are approached within the framework of scenographic photography. I look to my personal history as both a staged/stage photographer and performance designer, to explore how these representational artforms have influenced and continue to influence each other. Within THE BEAT GOES ON, I focus on issues of queer representation and in particular the representation of 'beat' spaces within some specific examples of photography and screen-based media. The politics of queer representation are further explored within STATION 7: THE POLITICS OF CAMP where I investigate how 'camp' has been used and is still used as a political means for gay signification and visibility. The political/polemic in art practice is further explored within STATION 8: REPARATIVE AESTHETICS where I look to Susan Best's text as a potential guide to approaching my practice as it primarily deals with the representation and re-presentation of sites of queer trauma.

STATION 11: IT'S A SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL and STATION 9: DARKNESS AS STRATEGY further outline strategies for presenting and re-presenting these sites of violence, damage and shame through the medium of scenographic photography. Throughout both of these sections of the exegesis I examine the aesthetic implications and contemporary practice of model-making within fine art photography and how darkness

can be used as a queer interpretive strategy within the photographing and presenting/re-presenting of scale models of sites of trauma.

The presentation/representation/re-presentation framework for scenographic photography is further disseminated in STATION 12: STAGING THE WORK in which I critically explore strategies for people to physically and psychically engage with my re-presented creative work.

Cruising Wonderland welcomes you to follow me down my rabbit hole. Within the writing presented here and the presentation of my body of scenographic photography I attempt to articulate this world of wonder, which strives for a new visceral, embodied connection between photograph and audience. At the heart of this exploration are the narratives of hundreds of Australasian men who were beaten and/or murdered because of their perceived otherness. *Cruising Wonderland* attempts to use the emerging field of scenographic photography as an integral means to create awareness and understanding of the shameful history of homophobic violence within New Zealand and Australia. This PhD project is a memorial to queer suffering.

STATION 3
WONDERLAND

HISTORICAL AND PERSONAL BACKGROUND TO PROJECT

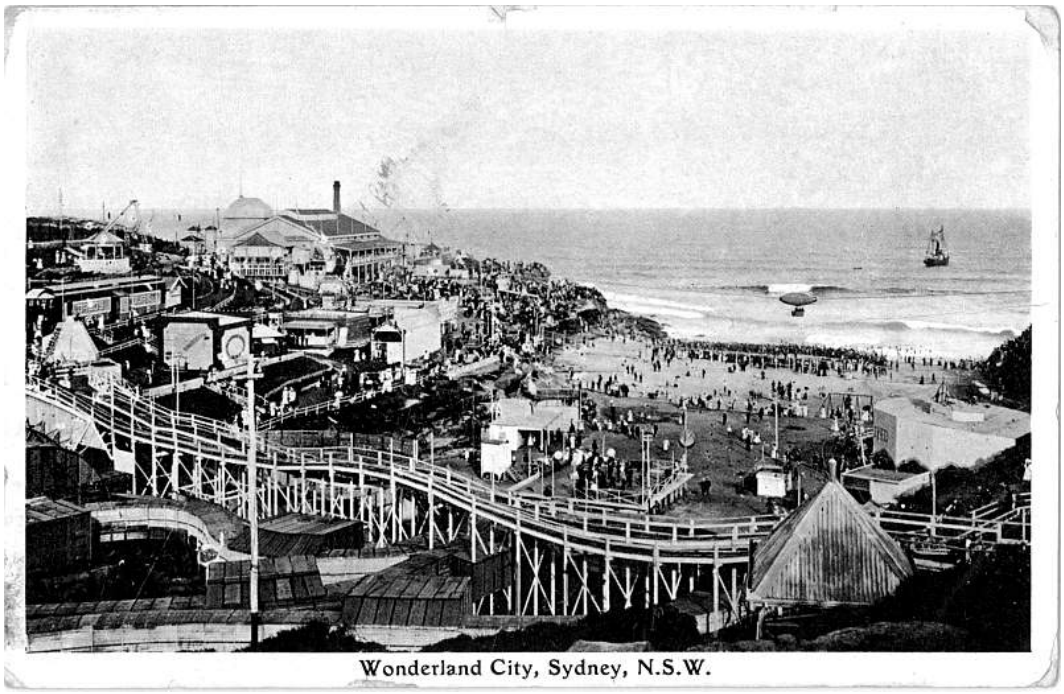


Fig.18. Photographer unknown, *Wonderland City vintage postcard*

The significance of 'Wonderland' as a conceptual touchstone for this research project, the term existing in tandem as both a creative, scenographic framework and real historic site of queer trauma, was initially provoked by an investigation into the Sydney gay murders which took place predominately during the turbulent decade of the 1980s. As a teenager of the 1980s who grew up in suburban Australia, the stories of homophobia and violence I absorbed resonated in a profound way. I was transported back to my youth, to the violently homophobic Catholic boys' school I attended and to what it was like to be young, queer and afraid (of catching AIDS, of getting bashed, of getting murdered, of getting

arrested, of losing friends, of losing family, of being outed, of being ridiculed, of being my true self). I remembered the flippancy with which school students would openly talk about beating up someone because they thought they were a homo, a faggot, a fag or a poofter. This was accepted as normal behaviour during my years of secondary school and created a plethora of young gay men (like myself) that dare not accept and celebrate their sexuality for fear of retribution. Such personal history compelled me to explore how and if I could utilise my creative practice to begin to understand the historic significance of the widespread homophobic/heterosexist violence that exists within Australasia. I take inspiration from Denzin and Lincoln's belief that the responsible researcher should declare themselves so as to acknowledge any potential bias (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, p. 27).

WONDERLAND CITY AND THE PLEASURE GROUNDS

Between 1906 and 1911, in the coastal suburb of Tamarama, Sydney, framed by the iconic cliff faces of its neighbouring suburb Bondi, there briefly existed the largest open-air amusement park in the southern hemisphere—named *Wonderland City*. The site of this failed colonial endeavour had previously been known as *The Pleasure Grounds* (existing from 1887 to 1906). Inspired by the successful amusement parks of Coney Island USA, *Wonderland City* was a family-oriented theme park, which featured many significant attractions including a balloon ride that would rise up to 3800 feet high, miniature railways travelling around the cliffs towards Bondi, waxworks, an open-air ice-rink, a double-decker merry-go-round, an elephant named Alice, an American-style shooting gallery and a 'fairy city' made up of thousands of coloured lamps. Breakdowns and safety scares on the Airem Scarem airship that tracked on a cable from cliff

to cliff, coupled with an increasingly annoyed population of residents nearby who had lost access to their local beach, helped force the closure of *Wonderland City* after merely five years of operation.

Within half a century the area previously inhabited by *Wonderland City* and *The Pleasure Grounds* became known (amongst those in the know) as a popular 'beat'—a renowned location for men cruising for sex. During the 1980s this area became the location for a series of repeated and calculated episodes of 'poofter bashing' where gangs of youths would entertain themselves by overpowering and beating men they perceived as gay, leading to a number of men being thrown from the surrounding cliffs to their deaths. It is estimated that, from the 1970s, around 80 men were murdered in New South Wales alone because of their assumed sexual identity (Benny-Morrison 2016). In Sydney during the 1980s and early 1990s, a spate of gay-hate killings occurred, often within the 'queer space' of the beat. The most common motive, according to the Criminology Research Council's report into these hate-crimes, was a mix of deep, irrational homophobia and violent conceptions of heterosexual masculinity (Tomsen 2001). The perpetrators of these crimes tend to be young, male and mostly working in groups. Youth gangs would frequent beats and prey on men for sport, submitting them to often-horrific beatings. Due to the stigmatised perception of homosexuality, the perceived deviancy of cruising and a general distrust of police, many of these incidents would go unreported, which led to a sense of invincibility among the offenders.

Many have linked the spike in homophobic violence in the 1980s to the AIDS crisis. Gay men were often blamed for the spread of AIDS and, in popular media, they were reduced to representations of either subjects of ridicule or diseased, dying and dead. Gay men's lives had little worth. The

controversial 1987 Australian AIDS educational commercial featuring bowling Grim Reapers fuelled this collective paranoia and anger. For many Australians, the Grim Reaper became the gay man hell-bent on destroying the very fabric of acceptable heteronormative society. In *A queer time and place* (2012), Halberstam talks about the 1980s as an example of 'Queer Time' (Halberstam 2005). During the AIDS epidemic, the notion of a diminishing future created an emphasis on the now—an urgency of being in the present. 'Queer Time' becomes not just about compression and annihilation but also allows for the potentiality of not subscribing to the heterosexual norms of traditional family, children and inheritance (whether of morals, wealth or values). During such 'times' queer subcultures can produce alternate temporalities where participants can create futures outside the normative life experience of birth, marriage, reproduction and death (Halberstam 2012, p. 2). Sydney's queer community during the mid-1980s was decimated by the AIDS crisis. This created a new public visibility of what was previously a fringe, relatively invisible identity. Alongside the media barrage of dying gays made popular by the exploitative form of what is now referred to as 'deathbed photography', new forms of visibility were emerging from this queer time and space—most notably that of the activist and the proud queer. With increased visibility came an increased awareness and hatred of the queer community from many factions of society. This led to a substantial increase in violent homophobic offences.

Many of the homophobic murders in Sydney were treated not as homicides, but as accidents or suicide. In particular, the cliffs around Bondi, once the route of the *Wonderland City* railway and a known, and policed, beat since the mid-20th century became the site of a series of homophobic bashings and murders. Strangely, the NSW police at the time did not think that these incidents were connected or that they may be

homophobic in nature. It was only through the perseverance of victims' families that an inquest into this series of deaths revealed the extent and true nature of these acts of homophobic violence (McNab 2017). Given the location and historical activity of gay interaction and homophobic violence within the *Wonderland City* and *Pleasure Grounds* environs since their demise as a fairground, the colonial vision of Wonderland takes on a more poignant and metaphorical significance within my creative framework.

SERVING UP REALNESS

Taking provocation from the site of *Wonderland City*, this PhD project explores the concept of 'Wonderland' as a personal model for combining scenographic photography as installation to reference these specific sites of trauma via historical 'real' events. Throughout this doctoral research I have investigated how landscapes of trauma can be memorialised and recontextualised through art and performance and what value this practice-based research has in helping to understand and communicate the reality of these specific sites and events of homophobic violence. This project then examines through practice how the 'real'—places and people, can be communicated via the 'unreal'—scenographic artifice of Wonderland.

In investigating and recontextualising the 'real' people involved in such events—both victims and perpetrators of violence—alongside the 'real' places within which they took place, I begin by unpacking the terminology of 'realness' from a queer perspective. The concept of 'serving up realness' (the queering of the term 'realness') is one that has infiltrated mainstream gay culture, in large part thanks to Jenni Livingstone's 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning* and contemporary drag artist and pop cultural icon, RuPaul. Realness becomes a performative construction, part

parody, part gender performance. RuPaul 's song *The Realness* (2015) confounds real and reality as cultural constructs, stating: 'Real is what you feel / Feelings aren't real'. Although this realness of which the queens speak on RuPaul's television program *Drag Race* tend to be with tongue firmly in cheek, it recalls Judith Butler's take on the politics of drag in *Gender is Burning*:

> Drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality. (Butler 2014, p. 125)

If we consider drag as a subversive act that parodies and challenges the hegemonic obsession with gender binaries and the 'realness' of our sex declared at birth, then the 'real' in drag is, like an inch-long false eyelash, a heightened *commedia dell'arte* mask which challenges cis-heteronormativity. The drag queen exists as a distorted funhouse mirror, reflecting and perverting the way we see our gendered selves. When drag queens speak of 'realness', it is very different to their talk of 'passing', which implies they are successfully able to present/perform their non-birth gender in a way that is convincing to the unsuspecting. Drag 'realness' does not comply with gender binaries, rather it alludes to a parodic airbrushing of the truth, through a recourse to camp strategies of humour, exaggeration and the subversion of hegemonic signifiers.

By locating the term 'realness' within queer representation it is difficult to move past the politics and aesthetics of camp. The glitter and glamour of gay male performance is an ever-present trope, one which I re-imagine and subvert: discussed at greater length in STATION 7: THE POLITICS OF CAMP. The strategy of situating the recognisable and signifying qualities of camp and gay male aesthetics within a non-normative fashion is useful

for this project which attempts to create a way of looking at and experiencing our recent traumatic queer histories in a new and reparative way. In subverting the queerly familiar, the work within Wonderland requires the spectator/participant to look beyond the often superficial aesthetic presentation/representation/re-presentation of gayness and begin to acknowledge the darkness lurking beneath.

REPRESENTING THE DARK IN QUEER HISTORIES

My Wonderland is an attempt to draw upon existing queer methodologies and find new ways of representing what Daphne Brooks discusses in *Bodies in dissent* as 'the aesthetic of darkness' (Brooks 2006, p#). For Brooks, this constitutes an interpretive strategy of reading the world from a 'particular and dark position' (Brooks 2006, p#). Within this PhD project that dark position is, as mentioned previously, the historic sites of queer trauma. In looking to these sites of trauma as 'inspiration', I refer to Judith Halberstam's assertion that the queer artist uses the historic legacy of 'failure' as an aesthetic strategy for occupying their place within darkness and that this position becomes a defining aspect of the 'queer aesthetic'. (Halberstam 2011, p. 96)

Heather Love, in *Feeling backward: loss and the politics of queer history,* talks of the importance of acknowledging our dark and troubled queer histories rather than falling into the trap of overly positivist representations of queerness. Love advocates for a strategy to explore queer stories not just from a 'liberal histories' perspective, where narratives show progressive stories of improvement and success, but intrinsic to queer are the 'radical histories' which contend with a much messier past and which passes on the legacies of failure and loneliness as the consequences of homophobia, racism and xenophobia. Love questions how the mass-

mediated representations of the successful and ridiculously attractive gay and lesbian, whilst successful in helping move forward the Pride movement, actually connect with the ongoing reality of historic and current violence and inequality. This progressive and triumphant pursuit of the queer utopia often teaches us to resist the 'damage' by moving on from victim status to affirm our queer existence (Love 2007).

By simply embracing the term 'queer' we show our willingness to acknowledge and engage with the dark, historic injury, damage and shame associated with the word, which now has a positive and empowering meaning. However, its roots are very much within a lengthy violent past. Contemporary gay identity is born from the relatively recent history of queer abjection where gay pride is a reverse or mirror image of gay shame.

My Wonderland is the manifestation of an exploration of damage, trauma, violence and shame. Within my Wonderland I acknowledge and pay homage to my queer forebears who both suffered for and celebrated their otherness. Taking inspiration from Muñoz's *Cruising utopia – the then and there of queer futurity,* my practice looks at the spectres of queer space. Muñoz states:

> 'Ghosts' are useful for a queer criticism that attempts to understand communal mourning, group psychologies and the need for a politics that 'carries' our dead with us into the battles for the present and future. (Muñoz, J 2009, p. 46)

So rather than look at the individual representations of the real people who have lost their lives, my practice explores the communal representation of the associated trauma through scenographic photography. Throughout my practice I have avoided re-victimisation through neither naming nor spelling out the specifics associated with the

trauma. This is a deliberate strategy to create work which challenges but that does not limit audience readings to a specific traumatic event. The photographs within Wonderland are reminders that the sites where specific men's blood was spilt still exist, mostly now disassociated from their violent and homophobic history. In placing these sites together within my Wonderland they form a communal connection, which makes a claim to their significance as queer historic places. In reality these places carry on within their normative function but in Wonderland their presence allows for a moment of reflection and memorialisation.

And so, I invite you to enter my Wonderland, my radical historicising, darkness-inhabiting, politically camp world of failure where I will be serving up some post-traumatic realness for you to cruise.

PART II

THE BEAT GOES ON

Fig.19. Sean Coyle, *Piranha Park: diorama* (2016) pigment print, 80cm x 80cm

STATION 4
REPRESENTING QUEER SPACE AND TIME

> Queer restaging of the past helps us imagine new temporalities that interrupt straight time. (Muñoz, J 2009, p. 171)

As discussed in the previous chapter this project has taken sites of homophobic violence as catalysts for the creation of a visual text to be presented. A vast majority of the specific sites explored through model-making (Bondi Cliffs, Manly Heads, Deep Creek, Piranha Park, Alexandria Park, Sydney Carpark, Hagley Park, Torrens River) exist, or have at some stage existed as 'beats'. This station focuses on the psychology and spatiotemporal qualities of 'the beat' as a threatening space of marginal superfluity and queer surplus.

Fig.20. Sean Coyle, *Sydney Carpark: diorama* (2017) pigment print, 80cm x 80cm

In Australasia the term 'beat' refers to an area frequented by men to cruise for casual sex: deriving from and parodying the 'beat' that both the police and prostitutes are said to walk. Most of these sites exist primarily as heteronormative public spaces (e.g. public toilets, parks, carparks) but are also transformative, allowing for the co-existence of queer space and time, a place where participants within this highly performative and ritualised environment are able to eschew the hegemonic rules of heteronormativity.

> Technically, any place for picking up other men constitutes a 'beat' … Usually the word was confined to those outdoor areas where meetings and pick-ups could take place. There were also a large number of these outdoor beats around Sydney. Once again they had to fulfil several criteria: there had to be a legitimate reason why men would be there, and they had to be places where one could legitimately strike up a conversation with another person – to ask for a light, for example, or ask the time. (Wotherspoon 1991, p. 67)

This chapter explores these sites of sexual perusal and performance and their medial representation, focusing on the disruption and violence that occurs when the natural flow of the homotopic 'beat' space becomes polluted through the presence of outsiders.

Fig.21. Chad States, *From the series 'Cruising'* (2011)

In researching various visual representations of the performance and photography of 'cruising' I am drawn initially to the work of contemporary photographer Chad States (Fig.21.). States's work, and in particular his series *Cruising*, documents real spaces of cruising and their inhabitants, relying on the voyeuristic history of the photograph to transport the spectator into the world of the illicit. By placing us, the viewers, at eye height within the bushes of the beat we become active participants within the coded, ritualised modes of 'looking' and 'being looked at' inherent to cruising. We are forced to engage with 'real' men within this world, not the superficial, sanitised representation of the attractive gay man prevalent in much sexualised imagery of 'men who have sex with men'.

Drawing on the assumption that many beat spaces are thought of as abject, dirty and diseased, this station draws on the previously mentioned existing queer methodologies and strategies for representing 'the aesthetic of darkness' and looks to some key examples of how the scenography of the beat has been packaged within contemporary cultural production.

Historically, beats have existed since colonisation, in all Australian and New Zealand cities and large towns. They most commonly take the form of a park, public toilet, beach, hotel, cinema or carpark. In much of the 20th century homosexuality was illegal and so these spaces allowed men with non-heterosexual desires an opportunity to find like-minded individuals. In his paper '*Beating space and time',* Daniel Marshall describes the beat as allowing participants the opportunity of existing within 'queer space and time'. In Marshall's opinion these sites become spaces of 'queer cultural geographies of masculinities' (Marshall 2015, p. 34). This concept of queer space is further articulated by Aaron Betsky as both including and being

beyond the world of the beat:

> [Queer space] has shown all of us how to create identities that depend on real experiences and connections with other humans to create a community that is not dependent on institutions or clichés, but that is an ephemeral, woven network of belonging that allows us to cruise through the continually changing landscape of the modern metropolis. Queer space is not one place: it is an act of appropriating the modern world for the continual act of self-construction. It is obscene and artificial by its very nature. It creates its own beauty. (Betsky 1997, pp. 192-193)

Betsky sees the practice of cruising as offering a means for understanding and engaging with urban space in a way that differs to the normative paradigm (Betsky 1997, p. 142).

To heteronormative society 'beats' are often spaces existing only to serve their normative purposes. A public park is a daytime space for shared activities—walking the dog, picnicking with family or playing cricket. The nocturnal transformation of such space to sexual beat rarely enters the collective hetero consciousness. An exception to the hetero naivety associated with the beat may be the unintended encountering of abject remnants, traces or debris of illicit activity like disused condoms, cigarette butts, holes in toilet walls and graffiti profanity. Welby Ings gives a thorough New Zealand overview of the cultural and historic significance of the public toilet as beat space within his exegesis *Talking Pictures: a creative utilisation of structural and aesthetic profiles from narrative music videos and television commercials in a non-spoken film text*. In his exegesis Ings succinctly demonstrates how the 'bogs' and their accompanying abject remnants become a significant site of importance within his award winning short film '*Boy*'. (Ings 2005, pp. 294-307)

Often within these normative spaces the presence of the illicit exists as a kind of haunting, long after the men have exited the beat. Muñoz discusses this phenomenon under the banner of what he calls 'the ghosts of public sex' (Munoz 2009, pp. 33-48). This idea of a haunting within queer space has become a key strategy for me within my creative practice. Much like the queer space of the beat, I take the normative gallery space and utilise spatial relationships and historic narratives from the 'beat' to create a performative environment that draws from and pays homage to its 'ghosts'.

Image subject to copyright

Fig.22. Kohei Yoshiyuki, *From the series 'The Park'* (1979)

STATION 5
POLICING THE BEAT

A prominent aspect of the beat's allure is the presence and potentiality of danger—that of the unknown predator but significantly of the fear of being arrested for unwholesome activity. The act of policing 'beats' creates a sense of danger and forbidden excitement, which inadvertently adds to the illicit thrill of the experience for men who cruise. This means that law and transgression are mutually reliant. Derek Dalton in his paper 'Policing outlawed desire: homocriminality in beat spaces in Australia' makes the argument that through the act of policing 'beats', the law is in fact creating a sense of both impending threat and the forbidden excitement inherent to this, which adds to the illicit thrill of the experience for men who cruise. This means that law and transgression are mutually reliant. Dalton examines why (to the law) particular beat spaces were often thought of as 'abject, dirty and diseased' and that it is the visibility of gay men within these spaces that creates hostility within police. Of interest to me is how 'performance' is used in the policing process. Undercover police officers on the 'police-beat' are known to use masquerade, mimicry, gesture, costume and performative protocols as a means of eliciting undesirable activity within the homo-beat. These tactics are used to get the cruising men to respond to the apparent signals of desire: with often traumatic outcomes including naming, shaming and public humiliation. Dalton discusses how police have long associated and 'read' the presence of gay men in a public space as a signifier of guilt. Having a space occupied by male bodies transforms it into a perceived crime scene, one that exists under (the fear of) constant surveillance (Dalton 2007).

Fig.23. Robert Yang, *Still from the downloadable game 'The Tearoom'* (2018)

An interesting contemporary work that deals with this dichotomy between police enforcement and cruising is Robert Yang's historical public toilet simulator *The Tearoom*.[5] This work takes the shape of a downloadable game set within a historic public toilet in Ohio in 1962. Creator Yang has described it as:

> … a historical public bathroom simulator about anxiety, police surveillance, and sucking off other dudes' guns. In it, you basically cruise other willing strangers for sex, and try to have some fun without getting caught by undercover police. (Yang 2017)

This multi-layered work is inspired by the 1960s sociological research of Laud Humphries on the practice of sex in public toilets (Humphries 1970) and a 1962 surveillance sting in Ohio where police filmed men cruising behind a strategically placed two-way mirror in a public restroom. In

[5] 'Tearoom' is an American slang term for 'the beat'. It was made popular by Laud Humphries's extensive sociological study of men who frequent public toilets for sex *Tearoom trade*. (Humphries 1970).

Yang's *Tearoom* simulator he substitutes all penises for guns as a deliberate political act. He states:

> Today in 2017, police still target men who have sex with men – and in video game land, I still have to deal with Twitch banning my gay games by secret trial as if they're the fucking game police. So to appease this oppressive conservative gamer-surveillance complex, I have swapped out any pesky penises in my game *for* the only thing that the game industry will never moderate nor ban – guns. Now, there's nothing wrong with guys appreciating other guys' guns, right? (Yang 2018)

Fig.24. Robert Yang, *Still from the downloadable game 'The Tearoom'* (2018)

Yang reinterprets and queers the hyper-masculine and violent world of online gaming to create a queer performative space that mines the anxiety, paranoia and illicit thrills associated with cruising. In his 'modelling' of the beat space he creates a highly textured environment that subverts the gaming convention of having highly detailed and decrepit bathrooms that generally do not serve any real gaming purpose except as signifiers of 'expense and production value' (Yang 2018), these

spaces are generally never used for the intended abject purpose they serve.

As a signifier of minority excess, perceived by the heteronormative hegemony, 'the beat', like Yang's *Tearoom*, is a spatiotemporal counter-flow: a disruption from that which societies prohibit, destroy, limit and oppress. 'The beats' have various life spans, an ebb and flow of activity within subcultural geographical and architectural boundaries. 'The beat' is a manifestation of queer excess and expression within the mainstream flow of the heteronormative world.

STATION 6
THE INFECTED BEAT ON SCREEN

Many of the locations of focus within my research exist or existed as beats. In exploring these spatiotemporal sites, I have been drawn to the historic and contemporary visual modes of representation in which men cruise for sex with other men. Without launching into an exhaustive list and analysis of 'the beat' on screen I will focus primarily on *Cruising* (1980) by William Friedkin, Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake* (2013) and the more recent Australian mini-series *Deep Water* (2016). At the heart of each of these works for screen is the disruption of the utopic beat through a series of violent murders.

Politically, the history of the film *Cruising*, starring Al Pacino, is interesting. When news broke amongst the burgeoning gay community of New York City in the late 1970s that Gerard Walker's deeply problematic and homophobic novel Cruising (1970) was being made into a film, there was a justified uproar. The novel focuses on an undercover detective infiltrating New York's gay scene in the late 1960s/early 1970s. In the novel Walker depicts this new queer world as an alien culture, filthy and diseased. During production of the film, which shifted its focus to the leather/S&M subculture within New York City's Meatpacking District, an ongoing protest occurred within the queer community to disrupt its shooting. In an era when there was little to no representation of homosexuality within mainstream media, it was feared that a major motion picture by the award-winning director of *The Exorcist*, which depicted the murdering of 'depraved' gay men by a psychotic, 'closet-homo with daddy issues' would set back the gay liberation movement and potentially lead to more violent

deaths of men. In a post-Stonewall[6] and pre-AIDS time, the narrative of the film has 'straight' undercover policeman Steve Burns (Pacino) moving between various sites of cruising—the leather bar, S&M club, peep show and park. Nathan Smith describes much of the reason for the controversy on the 35th anniversary DVD re-release of the film:

> What made this film so controversial at the time was its pathologization of gay men — especially given the murderer at the centre is apparently a closeted homosexual. The film engages in the often-used cinematic and literary trope of the closet (where the murderer hides his gay leather/murderous dark identity inside a dilapidated white cupboard). The larger gay community is treated with distance and curiosity by Friedkin, mostly represented as an anti-social, violent and unstable cohort far more interested in sex and drugs and booze than in pride marches and communal camaraderie. (Smith 2015)

Within the film design, an authenticity was utilised through the production's insistence on using the real 'queer spaces' and inhabitants within the meatpacking district of New York. In this AIDS-cusp era, the physical world depicted within the production design of the film offers a significant cultural contribution to the archiving of 'queer time and space'. Within five years many of the sex clubs and bathhouses depicted in *Cruising* would be closed by the New York City Health Department as the AIDS crisis truly took hold. The production design and interactions by real participants, many of whom would undoubtedly have succumbed to HIV in the years following, hold an unintended poignancy when viewing *Cruising* through a post AIDS-crisis lens.

[6] The 1969 Stonewall riots that occurred outside the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, Manhattan, by a local queer community fed up with their continued harassment by police, are often cited as the inciting incident and birth of the modern gay liberation movement.

Fig.25. United Artists, *Still from Cruising* (1980)

The problems associated with the politics of representation within *Cruising* are obvious to a contemporary audience who, thankfully, have been treated to slightly more diverse portrayals of gay men than the historic tropes of psychopath, screaming queen, deeply unhappy or punchline for a joke (subject to be mocked and laughed at). What *Cruising* achieved was to expose a relatively small subculture, present this to a world who had little exposure to anything queer, and assert that gay men are predatory killers, victims or vacuously obsessed with sex and hedonism (Smith 2015).

Whilst researching beat spaces and homophobic violence I became aware of a proposed Australian television mini-series that was to look at the dark history of one of my significant sites of focus, Sydney's Bondi Cliffs. Given the advancement in queer representation since *Cruising*, and the previous under-acknowledgement of this horrific aspect of Australian history, felt like a positive move forward. Like *Cruising*, *Deep Water* follows a

heterosexual protagonist as they delve into the investigation of a series of (fictitious) murders around a (real) beat. *Deep Water*, I hoped, would expose and pay homage to the epidemic of hate-related violence and murders which occurred around the historic Wonderland site of Bondi during the 1980s. What became apparent on watching, however, was that this TV series became just another pedestrian crime drama that, similar to *Cruising*, utilised the trope of the 'great, straight saviour'. Positioning itself within the 'edgy' world of gay cruising, in a significantly important location of historic, queer trauma, the gay characters become rarely more than victims, used as narrative devices in the heterosexual characters' development (Marsden 2016).

As discussed earlier, the New South Wales Police have been heavily criticised for their handling of numerous cases of homophobic murder and violence during the 1980s. Multiple cases of, now assumed, hate crimes that occurred around Sydney (in particular the cliffs of Bondi and Manly Heads) were dismissed as accidental or suicide despite the locations being infamous within the police force as known and policed 'beats'. In 2013 an inquest was launched to review 88 deaths that occurred between 1976 and 2000 within New South Wales to establish whether they should be reclassified as gay-related hate crimes. Ted Pickering, who was Police Minister for New South Wales during the late 1980s, has now admitted that the local police culture of the time would have meant that police were well aware that predators were targeting and attacking gay men and that the perpetrators of this violence would have been acting on the assumption that the police would not go after them (Innis 2017). This very real history within Sydney renders the fictionalised narrative of the police in *Deep Water* problematic. Within the series, the determined detectives

expose the historic police cover-up of homophobic violence around Bondi in the 1980s and solve the contemporary spate of homophobic murders, effectively completing their hero's journey. This convenient round-up within the show's narrative leaves a bittersweet taste. What of the actual families and friends of the deceased and living victims of the epidemic of 'poofter bashing' within Sydney, who have had no closure? In her review of *Deep Water,* Maeve Marsden states:

> By making heroes out of contemporary police officers, the LGBT community is effectively silenced, and we lose the opportunity to hold the police force accountable, or question whether that much has changed. Despite their prevalence in every scene, we are offered few solutions for dealing with entrenched homophobia in the police force … Far from an exploration of local history, *Deep Water* is largely about absolving mainstream society of any responsibility, attributing pervasive cultural practices of homophobia to AIDS panic and suggesting that sexual repression was the root cause of toxic masculinity. (Marsden 2016)

Image subject to copyright

Fig.26. SBS, *Promotional image from 'Deep Water'* (2016)

Like *Cruising*, *Deep Water*, from a production design/cinemagraphic perspective, firmly places itself within the actual space of historic homophobic violence with much of its fictionalised violence filmed within the homophobic hunting grounds of the Bondi Cliffs. In clearly positioning a fictitious narrative, complete with tidy wrap-up, within the historic site of trauma, with messy and inconclusive wrap-up, the pictorial depiction and representation of Bondi Cliffs as significant site of 'dark' queer history becomes diluted.

It is revealing that the queerly reviled *Cruising* bears such unintended resemblance to *Deep Water*. While *Cruising* can be looked at as a result of the heteronormative attitudes of the time in which it was produced, where little to no visibility of queer representation existed on screen, the outrage by members of the LGBT community was still widely heard and, arguably, managed to be partly responsible for the cold reception it received upon its release. With time and distance, it is now possible to view *Cruising*, 37 years later, with a more informed collective consciousness pertaining to queer representation. Yes, although it is deeply problematic and partly responsible for countless examples of the trope of the psychotic, sex-obsessed, fetishistic leather queen within film, television and advertising, it did manage to create an international dialogue and awareness surrounding issues of gay representation, both negative and positive. The production galvanised a burgeoning politicised community, which successfully found ways to make its voice heard and tell the world that who you see on *Cruising* is not necessarily an accurate example of gay men. It is hard to see what positive impact the drama series *Deep Water* has had, except perhaps giving some uninformed viewers a brief history lesson on the subject of 'poofter bashing' in Sydney. What was extremely valuable

with *Deep Water* was that it was accompanied by a well-researched and informative documentary '*The Real Deep Water*'. This showed the faces and stories of real men, their families and friends who had been victims and perpetrators of homophobic violence around Sydney. I question whether the significance and historical importance of this documentary was lessened or, in fact, heightened by its inclusion as a kind of appendix to the fictionalised, prescriptive police drama *Deep Water*.

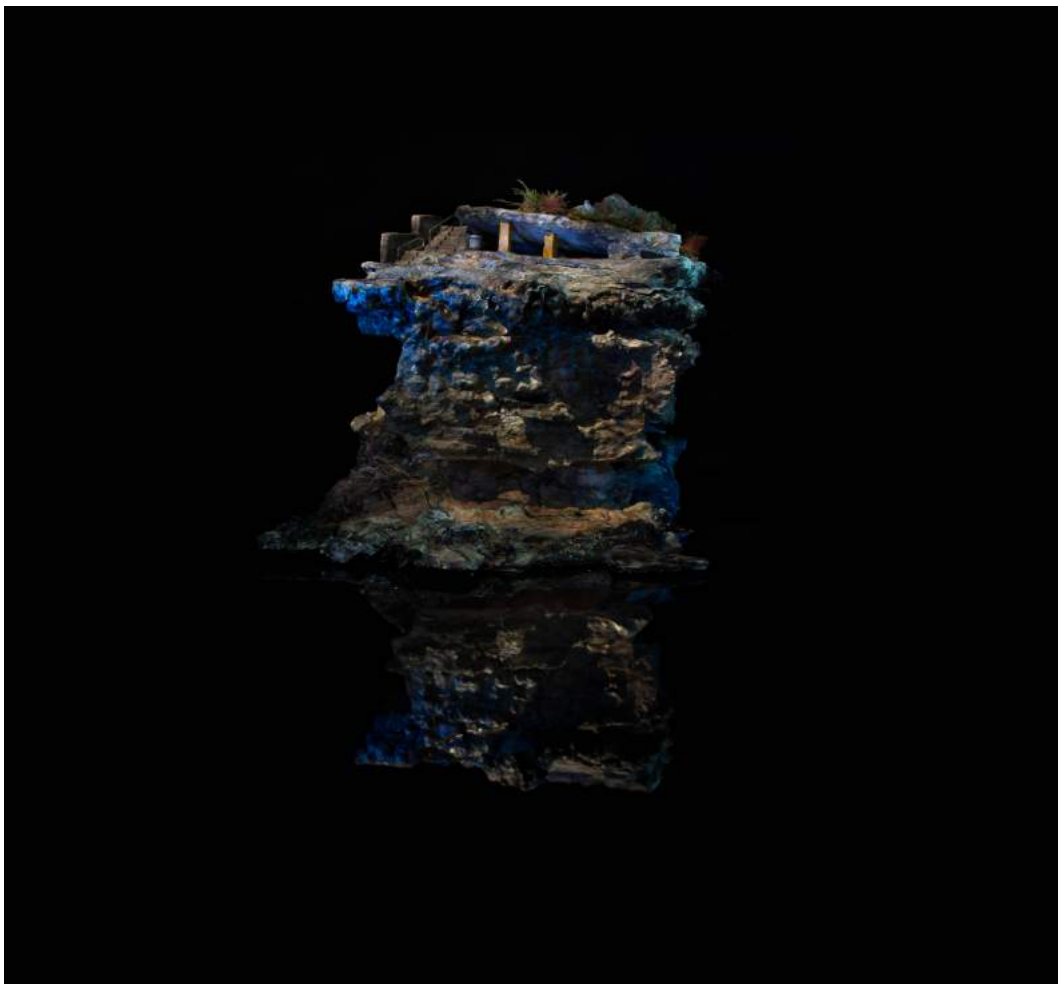


Fig.27. Sean Coyle, Bondi Cliffs: diorama (2016) pigment print, 100cm x 100cm

The highly acclaimed film *Strangers by the Lake* (2013), set entirely within an unnamed remote wooded area and French lake, also focuses on the utopic beat, which is severely disrupted by an act of murder witnessed secretly by the protagonist Franck. The beat in Guiraudie's film is

represented as a significantly less menacing and abject space than it is in both *Cruising* and *Deep Water*.

> In effect, all the men at the lake are strangers, regardless of their degree of physical intimacy. They leave society at large for a natural paradise of physical delight, an Edenic erotic garden with no clothing and no shame. (Brody 2014)

It is mentioned in the film that the other side of the French rural lake is the 'hetero side':

> The community at large seems to accept that the beach and the lake are divided in two. This very self-regulation, the prospect and peril of local popular rule outside the purview of higher authorities, is the core of the drama. (Brody 2014)

Image subject to copyright

Fig.28. Strand Releasing, *Still from 'Strangers by the Lake'* (2013)

The depiction of beat space within Guiraudie's film employs similar cinemagraphic techniques to States's series of still images (Fig.21.) where the act of 'viewing' is sometimes a voyeuristic pursuit in which we, the audience, become the watcher, looking through bushes at the ritualised practice of cruising.

A significant difference between this film and *Cruising* and *Deep Water* is the positioning of its protagonist as a willing and comfortable participant within the beat. The policeman who disrupts the utopic lake beach and surrounding woodlands is very much the outsider or the other. Within *Strangers by the Lake*, the killing and violence has a more severe metaphoric significance, the murder representing the beginning of the end of the community. The secondary character of the detective does not prevail and fulfill their hero journey but rather they too become victims within the now-corrupted utopia. Within each of these three examples of cruising and violence on screen, the photography of States and Yoshiyuki and Yang's *Tearoom* computer game, the act of 'looking' is a recurring and significant theme.

A long history of policing beats exists within Australia and internationally, and with regard to this research project, the 'act of looking' also becomes significant. Cruisers, predators and police within the beat space are engaged in a highly performative process of looking and being looked at. In her essay *"Look, a faggot!": the scopic economies of cruising, queer bashing and law*, Allyson Lunny describes the politics and performance of surveillance within the beat:

> Here, social control and the legal regulation of disruptive subjects and queer practices are woven back into the scene of disorder, in which the watchers, at least implicitly and perhaps unconsciously, are caught up in the web of desire produced by looking and being looked at … in order to catch perpetrators in the act, police had to adopt surveillant methods that allow them to blend in and pass as cruisers. (Lunny 2013, p. 235)

As alluded to earlier, the method of performing the role of 'cruiser' has long been used by police and 'poofter bashers' as an effective strategy for infiltrating the 'queer space' of the beat. These performative rituals are

described within Gavin Brown's essay *Ceramics, clothing and other bodies: affective geographies of homoerotic cruising encounters* (Brown 2008). Brown talks about the act of cruising as being more than a purely scopic practice and that it often involves a sequence of physical gestures and movements and choreography. To cruise is a complete sensory experience, a process of walking, gazing and engaging another. He believes the act of cruising takes site-specific forms where men play off and manipulate the features of a landscape that were not constructed with cruising in mind (Brown 2008).

It is this sense of cruising as an embodied, physical activity that I explore within the presentation of my practice of scenographic photography. The physical manifestation and presentation of my work involves the viewer taking on the position of cruiser (like in the work of States, Koshiyuki and Yang) to 'walk, gaze and engage' (Turner 2003). This expanded scenographic framework encourages an affective response to spectator engagement with the representation of damaged 'beat' sites presented as part of the visual text.

STATION 7
DARK CAMP

> I will not agree to be tolerated. This damages my love of love and of liberty. (Cocteau 1927, p. 76)

Within my Wonderland the political agency of camp has been explored within a number of individual works, primarily as a means for gay signification and to place the collective work within a distinctly queer space.

In the introduction to his book *Archaeology of posing,* Moe Meyer poses the question—is camp dead? He sees a cultural shift that has happened within the now less-marginalised gay community and the commercialisation of camp cultural phenomena like *RuPaul's Drag Race* that, potentially means much of the stigmatised shock and awe that allowed for cultural and political effect through drag/camp performance may have gone. Meyer has a long-held belief that positions 'camp' as 'the production of gay visibility'—i.e. the process for the social signification of gayness. In looking at camp in a contemporary context, and given its history as a means of activism and community/individual identity-forming, he questions whether there is still a need for it today (Meyer 2010, p. 1).

In recent years, as the need to produce a 'social signification of gay identity' has become less urgent through a societal shift towards homo-normalisation, it is important to look past the aesthetic of camp and focus on its importance as a distinctly queer means of political and cultural agency.

> Camp reveals itself … as a social agency based on remembering and citing the bodies of gay forebears; it is a set of strategies and tactics that exist within the collective memories (the performance repertoire) of gay men. (Meyer 2010, pp. 1-2)

This collective remembrance and enactment of camp is perhaps best personified in the political activism of the Gay Liberation Front of the late 1960s and early 1970s as a means to challenge the oppressive and homophobic discourses surrounding gender and then in the in-your-face protest action of groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. Meyer sees the fact that similar camp tactics that were used by the Gay Liberation Front of the 1960s reappeared in much 1990s queer activism as a potential for answering his earlier question of whether camp is dead. Like many discourses, camp, and in particular the radical and political manifestation of camp, has skipped in and out of history (Meyer 2010, p. 2).

Meyer believes that when camp is declared 'dead' by various critics and theorists it is the 'Pop camp' they refer to. The various aesthetic and stylistic (kitsch) phenomena that Sontag refers to in her seminal 1964 essay '*Notes on camp*' fall within this category of Pop camp, which mostly refers to objects and art. It is Meyer's steadfast belief that camp exists, both historically and in the present, as a gay performance/performative discourse and that much of its agency as a distinctly gay discourse has been erased due to both the appropriation of camp by the dominant culture and its relegation by various queer theorists like Judith Butler as an aspect of queer performativity. Meyer writes:

> Yet I experience, as stated earlier, melancholia, a sadness in the realization that the category 'gay' might be but a brief moment in history and that the grand vehicle of twentieth-century homosexual/gay identity formation – Camp – is itself falling victim

> to the ravages of time. Traditional Camp seems like an old drag queen staring at her sagging face in the mirror before her farewell performance. It is a new era of Camp – packaged, professionalized, and marketed … The Queen is dead; long live the Queen, so to speak. (Meyer 2010, p. 7)

José Muñoz asserts that much of the discourse on camp since Sontag has been focused on middle- to upper-class white gay male sensibilities. His positioning of camp is one that is not only (like Meyer) used as a strategy for representation but also as a mode of enacting self against the dominant culture's oppressive means of denying identity (Muñoz, J. 1999, p. 120). Muñoz sees very different strategies for enacting camp amongst non-white artists however and does not subscribe to Meyer's belief that camp is intrinsically a gay male experience, citing various examples of Latina Lesbian camp.

Academic and creative writer Dallas Baker in his play and associated paper '*Ghosts of Leigh: scripting the monstrous effeminate*' avoids using the term camp throughout his writing which surveys a similar terrain to Meyer and Muñoz. Rather he explores the notion of effeminacy (from a queer male perspective) and in particular frames his discourse around the concept of a 'monstrous' masculinity, which wields much discursive potency (Baker 2017, p. 330). Baker draws on Derrida who champions the production of 'discursive monsters' that challenge hegemony and revel in the unfamiliar, uncanny, absurd and horrific.

> Faced with a monster, one may become aware of what the norm is and when this norm has a history – which is the case with discursive norms, philosophical norms, socio-cultural norms, they have a history – any appearance of monstrosity in this domain allows an analysis of the history of the norms. But to do that, one must conduct not only a theoretical analysis; one must produce what in fact looks like a discursive monster so that the analysis will be a practical effect, so that people will be forced to become aware of

> the history of normality. (Derrida 1995, pp. 385-386)

Baker interprets Derrida's call for the production of 'discursive monsters' as a need for texts that defy expectations and refuse authority and conventional standards. He cites gender and sexuality as an example of those oppressive 'norms' that offer the most potential for resistance. Within his creative and academic writing, Baker uses the ghost figure of legendary deceased performance artist Leigh Bowery as an embodiment of his concept for a new and monstrous masculinity which disrupts the restrictive gender/sex norms (Baker 2017, p. 331).

Derrida and Baker's concept of the monstrous link to Kristeva's concept of the 'abject Other'. Abjection (or that which is horrific/monstrous) must, like bodily waste, be expelled. For those people who commit crimes against the established normative laws, rules, systems, borders or order, which then effectively highlight the fragility of these categories, are seen as abject and must be expelled.

Fig.29. Sean Coyle, *Still from 'Where the Boys Are'* (2017)

In the exhibition *Cruising Wonderland* at the Wallace Trust Arts Centre in Auckland, I included a video work titled *Where the Boys Are* (2017). This 12-minute video work displayed the individual first names of 80 Australian and New Zealand men who died or disappeared, presumably, because of their perceived sexuality. For nine minutes, individual, hot-pink names fade in and out of a silent black void before a single, close-up shot of myself in drag emerges to the sound of Connie Francis singing *Where the Boys Are*. This work uses the device of camp in its aesthetic realisation and also as queer performance practice. Following Meyer's assertion, I utilised camp in a 'production of gay visibility'.

What was important within this work was how Meyer and Muñoz's idea of camp and queer performance could be re-presented in a form which acknowledged its history as an often parodic form of queer entertainment and repositioned it to exist as a serious creative artifact that looks at historic queer trauma. *Where the Boys Are* became an important anchor within the show by providing a very conscious gay visibility to the photographic work that surrounded it. The overtly queer performance, and roll call of deceased men, gave context to the exhibited work. The performance echoes Muñoz's concept of disidentification to reimagine a 1960s heterosexual love song as a means of making sense of and mourning the queer dead:

> The aesthetic practice that I have previously described as disidentification focuses on the way in which dominant signs and symbols, often ones that are toxic to minoritarian subjects, can be reimagined through an engaged and animated mode of performance or spectatorship. (Muñoz, J 2009, p. 169)

The monstrous and the abject (dark camp) were also present within this exhibition, particularly in works which utilised red glitter blood. Using

glitter for blood subverts the expectation of glitter as a means of camp/queer revelry. Within the work *Glitterbomb* the face is smeared with glitter, which is in stark contrast to the delicate and detailed glitter make-up of much gay performance. The celebratory material (like the video drag performance) becomes a sombre reminder/signifier of violence committed, told through a queer performative medium. This particular photograph draws its title from the queer political activist act of throwing glitter at people who have publicly expressed homophobic statements and actions. This work acknowledges the camp history of political activism, in particular the radical campaigning of queer organisations like ACT UP and Queer Nation during the AIDS crisis and is a prime example of fitting within my category of 'dark camp'.

Fig.30. Sean Coyle, *Glitterbomb* (2016) dye sublimation print, 80cm x 80cm

PART III

HELLO DARKNESS MY OLD FRIEND

Witnessing involves more than looking on. It is a bodily experience intended to disrupt the visitor's sense of physical well-being. It demands, in other words, that viewers partake in a traumatic affect. (Heckner 2008, p. 63)

STATION 8
REPARATIVE AESTHETICS / QUEER TRAUMA / WITNESSING

In this station I further extrapolate on how scenographic photography, and the representation of sites of trauma, can be explored within a reparative context. I draw on Susan Best's concept of 'reparative aesthetics' as a framework for much of my practice-based creative research. In representing the disempowered through my scenographic photography I question how I am able to demonstrate the consequences of historic violence and trauma without necessarily evoking pity or shame.

Best draws inspiration from Sedgwick's concept of 'reparative reading' as opposed to the more familiar 'paranoid reading' when approaching cultural artifacts. To Sedgwick, a paranoid reading deals in suspicion as a means of avoiding shame and humiliation. To take a reparative approach allows the reader to be 'surprised' by avoiding the expected responses (Sedgwick, E 2002). Best explores how reparative aesthetics differ from the anti-aesthetic tradition in much political art such as that of Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer where 'the message' was often blatant and left very little ambiguity in its desire to reach its audience.

In her text *Reparative aesthetics: witnessing in contemporary art photography*, Best writes at length about New Zealand photographic artist Fiona Pardington who reignites historical memory by the re-contextualisation, re-enactment and re-vitalisation of her subjects. For Pardington, these may be artifacts and objects from colonial conquests,

such as archaeological middens, stolen Māori taonga[7] (sacred items like pounamu[8] and heitiki[9]) and historic life casts of heads of various Oceanic people. This re-photographing and re-cataloguing by a Māori wahine[10] artist subverts the postcolonial and institutional framework by highlighting the historical inequity of the taonga in state institutions (Best 2016, pp. 75-100).

Fig.31. Fiona Pardington, *Portrait of Matoua Tawai's Live Casting, Aotearoa, New Zealand* (2010) inkjet print, 145cm x 108.8cm

[7] Taonga is a Māori term meaning prized or sacred object or natural resource.
[8] Pounamu refers to New Zealand greenstone or jade.
[9] Heitiki are small carved ornamental pendants (usually made of greenstone) worn around the neck.
[10] Wahine is the Māori term for woman.

Like those of Pardington, my Wonderland photographs are also reclamations or reminders of past trauma, and inequity. These works, which are summarised in model form from the actual sites of queer trauma and violence, are less direct than the gesture of Pardington's historically defined objects. The act of recreating the sites of historical violence is a political attempt at reparation (and/or a call for reparation) to increase awareness of the heteronormative structures which covered up, minimised and/or ignored the violence perpetrated on queer communities within Australia and New Zealand.

Fig.32. Sean Coyle, *Alexandria Park: diorama* (2017) pigment print, 80cm x 80cm

Within Wonderland the dioramas act as summaries, loaded simulacra of the geographical, architectural and spatial essence of the sites of violence. The specific tragic narratives therefore are alluded to in much the same way that the potent relevance of a particular heitiki in institutional museum care is alluded to in Pardington's photographs. This historical refocusing, via the gesture of 're-cataloguing' the art object, prompts the viewer, and by extension curators, museum directors, academics and historians to re-evaluate the contemporary relevance and significance of the historical object. In this way the taonga re-photographed by Pardington, as with the Wonderland dioramas, serve to act as catalysts for ongoing political discourse, which is the major reparative function of the work. The Wonderland photographs encourage a queer re-reading of historical instances of violence and the heteronormative inequity and injustice that still prevails today.

One of the reparative functions of the dioramas is their ability to act as memorials and commemorations. In exhibiting these works, they provide an opportunity for public and professional focus and interface. This framework has a reparative function in much the same way as a monument that commemorates and memorialises those lost in war, or victims of the Holocaust. They act as sites of remembrance, but also as warning posts of the dangers of fascism, conflict and tyranny. My 14 Stations of Wonderland provide opportunity for remembrance, homage, debate, discourse, understanding, empathy and protest. From a reparative point of view, this body of work provides a potential outlet for the celebration and affirmation of queer perspectives and the possibility of equality and societal acceptance.

Within each Wonderland station the stories of victims are embedded and for the most part devoid of any human figure. In the case of *St Sebastian* the figurine acts as a queer signifier of martyrdom and so within the context of the larger body of works functions metaphorically and symbolically.

Fig.33. Sean Coyle, *St Sebastian* (2017) pigment print, 80cm x 80cm

This codification of site, which distances itself from the direct representation of victims and weapons used in the acts of violence, is a strategy employed to avoid any re-victimisation. The direct historical, visual re-enactment or regurgitation of material relating to the victims is deemed as a too-risky means of highlighting the historical events of

trauma. The avoidance of the above strategy enhances the reparative possibilities of the body of work. In minimising the risk of a gratuitous use of traumatic imagery, I avoid positioning the person murdered or assaulted as a victim or statistic. In presenting all the facts, the direct image has less potential to move outside its limited and negative reading and is more likely to induce a feeling of shame or guilt, which often limit the possibility of a reparative reading.

The high aesthetic quality of the photographic images within my Wonderland, and the surreal quality of the lifelike dioramas existing within a black void, are polar opposites to the pragmatic, analytical, scientific and forensic photographs of state authorities and media more commonly associated with sites of violence/murder. This aesthetic is born from a photographic and scenographic practice which harnesses the power of digital manipulation, attention to detail within the scale model construction, composition and enhancement through lighting states. Like the work of Fiona Pardington, the aesthetic treatment of subject matter, which creates a 'beautiful' or aesthetically pleasing and compelling image, is counter to the well-documented disparagement of 'beauty in art' critique, particularly photo-criticism.

> The power of photography to aestheticize whatever it pictures is routinely viewed with suspicion … the disdain for such traditional aesthetic concerns is certainly not limited to photo-criticism; it is part of a much wider anti-aesthetic sensibility that dominates the interpretation of modern and contemporary art. (Best 2016, p. 75)

The act of creating a beautiful object from a framework of historical trauma and injustice is, in my view, a valid strategy. The scenographic photographs, in being put through a high aesthetic process, have a two-fold reparative power. The heightened aesthetic quality, in being pleasing

to the eye, is more likely to be engaged with by the public. It is the incongruent content, juxtaposed by its visual treatment that is the power and agency of the image. If a public toilet in Hamilton, New Zealand becomes a successfully engaging and desirable image through its aesthetic treatment then it has an increased chance of succeeding in its reparative and political function. The polemic content and framework is still very much part of the object of beauty, and by association its reparative textual rationale and discourse. The other significant reparative quality of the heightened aestheticism of the Wonderland sites is that each individual station, and indeed the whole body of stations, becomes a desirable object. The stations are positioned as objects of meditation, homage and memorialisation. They guide the viewer through a violent and fraught narrative with redemptive and reparative qualities in much the same way as a churchgoer might move through the Stations of the Cross.

In drawing on the ritual of expressing belief and faith by 'going to church', the participation in religious ritual is a strategy within the Wonderland stations. It uses the Christian construct as a meta-narrative in the hope that by emulating the spatial and aesthetic qualities of the church/religious context, it evokes an internal moral evaluation of beliefs and perspective. The incongruence of queer perspective within an archaic, traditional, religious construct is an intentional combination which aims to facilitate reflection and aid in the questioning of long-held and/or restrictive belief systems. John Durham Peters terms this 'religious witnessing' and positions the participants as active (not passive) witnesses. For him the metaphoric re-enacting of past is like witnessing, however it lacks many of the usual qualities, given that the participants have not necessarily experienced the events they pay homage to and 'remember' (Peters 2001, pp. 46-47). For Best, 'religious witnessing' allows participants to:

> … call up rituals that ask us to remember, to bear witness to something we never experienced directly. (Best 2016, p. 93)

The ritual of moving through the church or Wonderland stations has the reparative potential of repetition. The ritual provides the format of memorising and experiencing a simulation of historical events. It provides an opportunity for personal and collective interrogation and re-evaluation of morality and belief systems that may be incongruent to Christian teaching, or in the case of the Wonderland stations, a re-evaluation of heteronormative modes of expression and viewpoints. Within the stations there is the acknowledgement of martyrdom, the dead and beaten queer man is elevated to Christ's suffering and sacrifice.

The high aesthetic therefore induces a potential veneration of the precious object which communicates a 'high art' sanctity and seriousness to the queer perspectives articulated and/or signified. The aestheticised scenographic models, by virtue of their treatment, could possibly be viewed as utopian, but can just as easily be read as an ironic parody of the aesthetic treatments employed to evoke utopian readings. The utopian veneer of the object is the desire for the stations to be taken seriously, for the trauma to be acknowledged by a wider community. The Wonderland works, in not conforming to a fashionable anti-aesthetic methodology, employ a conscious high-aesthetic strategy to assist in the consumption and digestion of the artworks. The aesthetic strategy of the Wonderland stations resonates with Best's reading of Pardington's exquisite photography (in particular her images of colonial life casts of heads in *The Pressure of Light Falling* series):

> Pardington's work very powerfully questions the idea that photography is a system of ideological constraint. For her it is a source of liberation … She queries the anti aesthetic position that

> opposes beauty to pain and the realities of political and social concerns, the opposition of beauty and political ideas is unequivocally refused by Pardington's work. (Best 2016, p. 76)

In the Wonderland stations, there is a noticeable figurative absence of victims, there are no depictions of the perpetrators of violence, and there are no representations of the human contact of the beat. The forensic violence is inferred and signalled through the selection of specific geographical sites that relate to historical events, allowing for a conscious 'distancing'. The aesthetic and conceptual distance of the Wonderland stations operates in a similar manner to the work of artist Anna Von Mertens (Fig.34.) who stitches the rotation of stars. Her work operates as a sort of eye of God in much the same way as the elevated perspectives of the stations. Von Mertens hand-stitches the stars via a computer-mapping program that calculates their position at the time of major historical, violent and traumatic events such as the Battle of Wounded Knee, Tet Offensive and September 11. They, like the Wonderland dioramas, are memorials and have a potentially reparative function of remembrance. In an interview, Von Mertens is quoted as saying:

> The most existential form of mapping is looking up at the stars and knowing where we fit in the giant puzzle of things … I am simply documenting an impassive natural cycle that is oblivious to the violence below. (Stockton 2014)

Fig.34. Anna Von Mertens, *5:34am until sunrise, March 20, 2003, Baghdad, Iraq (from the Palestine Hotel looking toward the Presidential Palace on the Tigris River)* (2006) hand-stitched cotton, 104cm x 248cm

The pictorial and conceptual separation relies on the viewer to decode, to investigate meaning, to decipher the signification, to investigate and research the text and specific histories of shameful trauma.

The Wonderland stations, presented as part of my PhD examination, desire that the audience not just 'look' at the photographs but watch, engage and witness so as to work through issues of shame or guilt that may be evoked, rather than being lectured by a direct transmission and representation of shameful content. In this way, the work attempts to facilitate a process of empathy and understanding, which has the reparative power to acknowledge, heal and create positive change.

STATION 9
DARKNESS AS STRATEGY

The idea of darkness as a conceptual framework, and how it is and has manifested within the arts is extremely complex and worthy of lengthy examination. However, for the purposes of this station and the focus of my research, I narrow my discourse on the general theme of darkness to the conceptual, aesthetic and compositional realities of 'darkness' within the Wonderland stations. In doing so, I have chosen a selection of queer artists in order to investigate how they have used similar aesthetic and conceptual methodologies to convey 'darkness' within their work. As with the Wonderland stations, this 'darkness' often articulates a politicised perspective whilst also using the visual and compositional strategy of the colour black within the work.

In looking at the idea of conceptual, artistic, queer darkness, one of legendary experimental film-maker and performance artist Jack Smith's notorious performances in the AIDS-stricken New York Village scene comes to mind. Fellow performance artist Carmelita Tropicana, as part of a later performance, recounts her experience of being a part of the audience:

> I was in the Village in a concrete basement. It was packed, eight of us wall to wall. There is a breeze blowing through the wall created by two fans. Beautiful Scheherazade music plays and out comes an Arabian Prince Jack Smith in a diaphanous material. He is dancing. He pours gasoline in the middle of the floor to make a black lagoon. He takes out a match and throws it in. The flames grow and we think we are going to die but he chases, revolves and demi-plies to the corner and continues his dance putting the flames out with a plunger … I remember Jack Smith, who died of AIDS in 1989. (Muñoz, J. 1999, p. xiii)

In picturing this performance, as told through Tropicana's account, it is easy to imagine the claustrophobic and dim basement. The fiery light of the ignited gasoline 'dark lagoon', the illumination and amplification of Smith's carnivalesque performance whilst he precariously avoids a group immolation via his trusty plunger. The politicalised essence of Smith's performance lies within the 'darkness' of the AIDS epidemic. The 1980s and early 1990s proved themselves to be a hopeless, bleak, devastating, epoch of gothically traumatic proportions for a multitude of queer communities. In looking at this historical context, a possible reading of Smith's anarchic performance could refer to the potential for funereal sacrifice as a way to escape the suffering as caused by the AIDS virus (a queer artist's dark vision of an alternate end to a protracted collective and individual suffering). One could imagine Smith, notorious for his rambling manifestos, writing a rationale for the performance—maybe he would write this:

We are all going to die anyway, let's die dancing, not withering away in a hospital bed, exalting in our gayness, celebrating our anti-'pasty normal', commemorating what we have lost to AIDS, why not die now, in fabulous costume, and in this way, our very own underworld fiery sacrifice?

In the work of artist Derek Jarman there is a strong thematic and aesthetic application of darkness. In his filmology he often framed his highly colour-saturated scenes in darkness, or emerging from darkness (*Sebastiane* 1976, *Wittgenstein* 1993). In his film *Caravaggio* (1986) he emulated the painterly methodology of the Renaissance artist of framing figures and faces with dark backgrounds to accentuate the power and theatricality of his paintings. This aesthetic re-enactment also gives power to the thematic 'darkness' of the volatile and dramatic life of the artist. In Jarman's late

creative output, the film *Blue* and his *Black Paintings* series, the artist relies on particularly powerful and poignant expressions of conceptual and aesthetic darkness.

Fig.35. Derek Jarman, *Untitled: from the Black Paintings* series (1988) oil and mixed-media on canvas, 36cm x 26cm

His *Black Paintings,* produced in the final years of his life, are expressive, sculptural and darkly playful meditations of a theatrical sensibility. In deteriorating health, Jarman created these dark visions, fully conscious of the limited time afforded to him by his terminal illness. As a result, the *Black Paintings* series emanates an aura of creative desperation, which has a reparative, cathartic function. The works articulate an aura of urgency

and a desire for a more physical, tactile embodiment of his essence and artistic vision. There is an anti-aesthetic, uncompromising expressionist nature to these paintings, a desperate attempt to quantify his suffering and the suffering of others via the distressed dirtied detritus stuck onto the thick impasto of the black-painted ground. These paintings have their limitations and can only 'fail' in the task of quantifying queer suffering, but they 'fail' in a darkly fabulous queer way. Jarman's *Black Paintings* (as with Smith's dysfunctional basement performance) fit neatly into Halberstam's reading of the queer art of failure:

> … failure presents an opportunity rather than a dead end; in true camp fashion, the queer artist works with rather against failure and inhabits the darkness. Indeed the darkness becomes a crucial part of a queer aesthetic (Halberstam 2011, p. 96).

Jarman's film *Blue* is an intense personal account of his views on life and death, living with and dying of AIDS, creativity and queer sensibilities. The saturated blue static screen, narrated by Jarman and actor friends, is (despite the colour) about darkness and his physical/mental struggles and terminal illness. The film articulates his diminishing ability to see the world around him, his vision deteriorating rapidly towards blindness due the severe side effects of the AIDS drug treatments of the time. Jarman himself described his film *Blue* as representing darkness, to Jarman this darkness refers to his difficult subject matter (which includes the excruciating list of physical side effects of the drugs and deteriorating physical and mental effects of the virus on himself and others). He refers to the dark realities of war (Balkan Wars), the randomness of an airplane disaster, the roll call of the dead and dying of his friends to AIDS. His poetic prose projects his take on 'darkness' and within it, this segment of

text highlights his conceptual and aesthetic leap into darkness and the reassignment of the colour of black to the colour blue.

> *Blue protects white from innocence*
>
> *Blue drags black with it*
>
> *Blue is darkness made visible*
>
> *Blue protects white from innocence*
>
> *Blue drags black with it*
>
> *Blue is darkness made visible*
>
> (Jarman 1993)

Wonderland is a conceptual framework, an imaginative universe from which to articulate my creative and written outputs. The Wonderland is a black void and not spatially finite. It is a product of my imagination and creative output and research. Within Wonderland the dark realities, queer histories, traumas, struggles, successes and failures are subsumed, embedded within the metaphorical, symbolic all-consuming black void. In Wonderland the dark void represents the signification of death, finality, the universal void, negation, censorship, metaphysical sensibility, closets, the beat, cruise clubs, darkened labyrinths, mortality, death of self, finality, lack of perspective, loss, death of the other, death of heteronormativity, oblivion, loss of vision, hatred, oppression, trauma, evil, loss of hope and an emergence of hope within the infinite of queer possibility despite the darkness.

Fig.36. Sean Coyle, *Deep Creek: diorama* (2018) pigment print, 80cm x 80cm

Within this limitless blackness I place queer 'illuminations'. The illuminated darkness highlights the queer perspective and sensibility of the Wonderland stations, which focus on specific queer historical trauma. Over time more illuminations will be added to the constellation, further populating the Wonderland darkness. This concept of offering illuminations within darkness is reminiscent of Halberstam's discourse in which she quotes Quentin Crisp:

> The sky was so dark with millionaires throwing themselves out of windows. So black was the way ahead that my progress consisted of long periods of inert despondency punctuated by spasmodic

> lurches forward toward any small chink of light I thought I saw … As the years went by, it did not get any lighter, but I became accustomed to the dark. (Crisp 1968, pp. 7-8)

These 'chinks of light' are illuminations of Crisp's queer validation within a dark oppressive heteronormative world. Halberstam goes on to state:

> This particular ethos of resignation to failure, to lack of progress and a particular form of darkness, a negativity really, can be called a queer aesthetic (Halberstam 2011, p. 96).

Within the vast Wonderland construct, the darkness that represents the negative worldview is hopelessly oppressive, yet despite this I continue with my artificially lit dioramas. As individual works, these little queer worlds twinkle their narratives and histories despite not having much company. Each lit world represents another star within the Wonderland galaxy. Whilst the expansive, imaginative dark universe of Wonderland is oppressive it is also, paradoxically, a liberating construct, a place where change can occur, a place where light pierces the darkness. In the words of Halberstam I am 'the queer artist that works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness' (Halberstam 2011, p. 96).

Working with less light (i.e. working with darkness) allows for an analysis of the actual compositional realities of the images within the Wonderland stations. Firstly there is a total reliance on the technology of artificial light. This strategy is employed to conceptually enhance the artifice of the represented model. The stations are conceptually tighter as the artificiality of the illumination is in keeping with the artifice of the handmade models, and framing of model in the black void. In visually interrogating the images, each diorama treads a tenuous line for 'survival'. Compositionally they are situated within a larger void, the illuminated dioramas are smaller in size, subservient in scale to the darkness. The scenographic models are

under pressure and in danger of being overcome by the black but they are resilient and stubborn. The darkness has descended from the top, from the sides and from the bottom, trapping the dioramas in blackness.

One of the key dimensions of this notion of 'entrapment' is the negation of the horizon in the works. The overpowering nature of the void has limited the physical and conceptual context of a horizon. They are trapped in space with little or no hope of perspective, little or no hope for the audience/viewer to attain more knowledge, more transitional movement or perspective beyond the small area represented.

Individually the Wonderland stations are purposefully limited, treading a claustrophobic line, the only possibility of movement or of a greater perspective is that they operate in a series, each illumination and black void is part of a greater narrative. They are not alone, there is strength in community, strength in numbers. A single star dimly lit at dusk can be viewed as lonely and isolated, however with the black night others emerge. Within the Wonderland stations, the stars (the dioramas) can be mapped spatially and conceptually by the scenographic engagement of the audience. This bringing together of the work allows for a collective perspective and offers some form of hope in context, in being able to articulate and join the illuminations, we can give meaning to them.

In the spirit of queer illuminations that pierce, intersect, intervene and impact on the dark void, the words of Harvey Milk, recorded to be played in the event of his assassination, resonate:

> If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door in the country. (Shilts 1988, p. 372)

In this analogy, Harvey Milk imagines part of the heteronormative 'darkness' as consisting of a multitude of dark, unopened closets. The

piercing of darkness, via his martyrdom, is heroic, sacrificial and symbolic. In death, Harvey's vision was for the illumination of closets and the closeted, his metaphorical bullet providing the empowerment of a greater community, with an increased desire and hope for queer empathy and equality. The bullet that entered his brain was the bright queer 'key', which opened millions of closets.

Through the liberation from the 'darkness' of those more passive, Harvey's poetic gesture strives to be an agent for political and societal change much in the same way the Wonderland stations hope to. This concept of liberating the darkness through the spatial/scenographic process of 'staging' my work is further discussed in the following stations.

PART IV

STILL THEATRE

STATION 10
SCENOGRAPHY / PHOTOGRAPHY

As discussed earlier, Wonderland exists as a framework to explore the world of queer damage, trauma, violence and shame through the emergent art form of scenographic photography. In the introduction to this exegesis I positioned my practice and thinking within the relatively new creative genre of 'expanded scenography'. In placing scenography within an expanded field, taking the lead from Rosalind Krauss's 'expanding' of sculpture (Krauss 1979), we are able to think about it as not simply the residue of theatre, but rather as McKinney and Palmer posit, 'a mode of encounter and exchange founded on spatial and material relations between bodies, objects and environments, (McKinney & Palmer 2017, p. 2). The significant shifts that have occurred within scenography throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, like the move away from its perception as a purely decorative artform, the rise of postdramatic theatre (Lehmann 2006) and the increased blurring and redefining of what constitutes theatre and performance space, have helped make way for what is increasingly being referred to as 'the scenographic turn'[11].

For over 20 years I have worked in theatre, television and film; devoted to creating spaces for performance that are essentially illuminated and emergent from a black void. As a performance designer by education and practice, my core methodology has been to enhance the perspective and experience of the spectator of a performative narrative. Traditional

[11] Arnold Aronson and Jane Collins introduce the idea of the 'scenographic turn' within their editing of the inaugural edition of the journal *Theatre and Performance Design* (2015). They acknowledge its history as a phrase, dating it back to at least 2009 and Thea Bezjek's call for papers in the Scenography Expanding Symposium 2010.

scenographic practice dictates the construction of a theatrical environment which assists the performers to tell a story to the audience in a convincing way. The scenography could be quite minimal and abstracted, or mimetically portray realistic simulations of architecture and the natural world. Mostly these staged environments emerge from black; fading to black during the course of the performance, only to re-emerge and disappear again. Such worlds that play out on the stage have and still sustain my deep interest in theatre and performance. This scenographic way of thinking and seeing, born from years of practice within black box theatres, is evident in much of my historic practice as a photographer, notably in my collaborations with conceptual artist Shigeyuki Kihara.

Fig.37. Shigeyuki Kihara and Sean Coyle, *Sina and her Eel* (2003) c-print, 64cm x 53cm

Fig.38. Shigeyuki Kihara and Sean Coyle, *Tonumaipe'a* (2004) c-print, 64cm x 53cm

In exploring, and unifying, my practices of scenography and photography I have, as previously mentioned, explored the scenographic possibilities of various modes of presenting photography. The potential of thinking of a collection of photographs as a non-literary text to be performed, where spectators become an active and integral part of the process, may lead to what Lehmann defines as a 'more shared than communicated experience' (Lehmann 2006, p. 85). This thinking of photography as performed text within an expanded scenographic framework prompted an inquiry into

how as an artist I may begin to create my text (that being a collection of single images), and what place scenography and performance would play within this process.

In *Theatre, performance studies and photography: a history of permanent contamination*, Karel Vanhaesebrouck discusses how photography can and does exist as performance. He uses Butler's definition of performativity—in which gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity are understood as social constructions, transgressively displayed or normatively imposed to demonstrate how photography should be considered a truly performative practice. In particular, Vanhaesebrouck looks to the work of Cindy Sherman and Manuel Vason to help articulate his belief in the performative potential of photography (Vanhaesebrouck 2009, p. 104). Much of my early practice-based research within my PhD explored the Shermanesque still photograph performance tradition where I placed myself within the photograph. The 2016 image *What Cindy Said* (Fig.39.) is an example of my exploration of how the performative can exist within the polemic image. Drawing directly from Sherman's *Untitled #153,* I place myself within the photograph as Sherman has done. I mirror Sherman's autobiographical and performative strategies to articulate polemic themes. In the case of Sherman's work, her primary concern is to articulate 'loaded' images of women through a feminist lens, each within the projected stereotypes society has afforded them. In the case of *Untitled #153,* she is the symbolic representation of a woman as murder victim. In my work I have projected a queer reading of my 'performance' as murder victim of a gay bashing. By mirroring the strategic, thematic and formal qualities of Sherman's work I also point to the violence perpetrated by men against queer individuals and communities. In doing so I highlight the reality and ongoing issue of male violence.

Fig.39. Sean Coyle, *What Cindy Said* (2016) digital image

Fig.40. Sean Coyle, *Deliverence* (2015) pigment print, 60cm x 80cm

Within my career as a scenographer I have tended to adhere to the more physical, object-based model-making as a means to convey the scenographic environment and performative space. During the pre-production phase, I would photograph scale models and distribute to relevant people as visual/spatial reference points. The recollection of this communicative step within the scenographic process, and with the magic of physical model-making still very much inherent to my practice, a critical shift within my PhD journey occurred where my development of a photographic text to be performed advanced from focusing on the capturing of queer damage, violence, trauma and shame through performance (Fig.40.) to the endowment of scenographic models to explore the same thematics. I explore the politics and poetics of the scale model/miniature further in STATION 11.

In view of this shift in research focus, and in consciously removing the 'performing actor' from the constructed mise-en-scène, my research

became more concerned with how a depicted site of historic trauma could be represented in ways that allowed for a new affective way of experiencing the photograph that differs to the relationship the spectator may have with the documentary image of site. This design process of creating loaded spatial objects, without the initial need for bodies to occupy, became the more scenographic approach I had been looking for within the generation of my 'visual text'. The materiality of scenographic model-making, and the time and care required, allows for a contemplation and meditation on place that is difficult to achieve within the photographing of 'real' sites. This politically charged gesture of reclaiming these places of suffering, and re-modelling them to suit my various photographic, scenographic and aesthetic desires, fits within the expanded scenographic process of what Sigrid Merx refers to as 'activating the shifting of positions' (Merx 2013, p. 54), thus allowing the political nature of scenography to emerge. The political/socially engaged approach to much expanded scenography is often explored by the artist's ability to decide not just what is seen but also who, what and how is seen and heard (McKinney & Palmer 2017, p. 9).

Ultimately this research looks to enhance, integrate and redefine the relationships between photography and scenography whilst establishing a researched and documented model for creating reparative strategies for exploring queer narratives of trauma. Jose Munoz asserted that 'queer' has not yet arrived, his vision was one of collective transformation, a utopian ideal for the queer community (Muñoz, J 2009). My wish is to seek and explore this transformative vision through the constructed, staged and performative worlds created by the medium of scenographic photography and housed within my Wonderland.

STATION 11
IT'S A SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL

MODELS, MINIATURES AND MEMORY

This station addresses how the scenographic model, in moving beyond its purely representational function as miniature iteration of a larger design process, can become its own autonomous artifact. The model, when recorded through the medium of photography and staged lighting, becomes an uncanny re-presentation and actant in the spectator's engagement with the ambiguous, pictorial narrative.

Fig.41. Sean Coyle, *Torrens River: diorama* (2018) pigment print, 80cm x 80cm

Within Wonderland the model becomes 'the model', existing not just as a scaled-down replica of a larger vision. The sites explored through the craft/art of scenographic model-making exist, however, in the re-imaging through the artifice of scale modelling where they become fictionalised and memorialised when the documentary element is removed from the photographing of site. Removing them from the perceived 'real' of the documentary photograph allows for a theatricalisation to occur, the spectator is given permission to pursue their own ambiguous narratives. The model exists then as a conscious simulation and reinterpretation of reality. Baudelaire, in writing about the Paris Salon of 1859 says:

> I would rather return to the diorama, whose brutal and enormous magic has the power to impose a genuine illusion upon me! I would rather go to the theatre and feast my eyes on the scenery, in which I find my dearest dreams artistically expressed, and tragically concentrated! These things, because they are false, are infinitely closer to the truth; whereas the majority of our landscape painters are liars, precisely because they have neglected to lie. (Baudelaire 1932, p. 273)

Baudelaire celebrates the obvious deception inherent within the art of the diorama, thus positing it as an exemplary art form. This use of models within fine-art practice has a long tradition, from Daguerre's epic dioramas in the early 19th century to leading, contemporary exponents of the artform including James Casebere, Thomas Demand and Oliver Boberg (amongst many other contemporaries) who each display an intricate crafting of interior and exterior architectural 'scenes' in model form. Daguerre became famous as a dioramist and also early photographer and inventor of the dagguerrotype, the first widely used photographic technique. Prior to moving into the field of photography and diorama, Dagguere was himself a successful stage designer. His knowledge and mastery of theatrical space and light would inform much of his

photography and dioramas. The early dioramas were significant in scale, allowing for the presentation of grand scenes presented within theatre-like environments. The appreciation for this populist artform declined not long after its heyday and many of the diorama houses soon became chapels for worship. Kimberly Mair, in discussing the history of diorama (and panorama), explains that whilst they belonged to a populist tradition which celebrated their evocation of 'realism', as an art form they maintained an ambivalent status existing beyond the realms of 'novelty painting' or purely visual media but rather as a significant example of intermedia that relies on the inter/multi-sensory engagement with the spectator (Mair 2012, pp. 53-54).

In contemporary art practice there is a movement of artists who, like the historic diorama artists, pursue through the art of model-making and photography an evocation of 'realism', where specific sites (historic and contemporary) are recreated in a studio to be then recorded via the camera. Of significance within this genre of artists and relevant to this research project is the work of Casebere, Boberg and Demand.

Image subject to copyright

Fig.42. James Casebere, *Interrogation Room* (2008) c-print, 180cm x 230.5cm

Casebere has worked within the realm of 'constructed photography' for the last four decades, using his camera to explore the psychological and symbolic within architectural space. He finely crafts scale architectural/scenographic models and presents them with finely tuned studio lighting. Whilst much discourse surrounding Casebere likens his practice to that of an architect, it has also been argued that it is, in a sense, the opposite of what an architect does. Casebere's work tends to focus only on the aspects of a building that interest him and that he may like to photograph. He may distort or disrupt this space to suit his objectives, unlike the architect who crafts a model to be able to rationalise the unified, entirety of the space (Rose 2017). His connection to scenography and installation (as opposed to architecture) is made more explicit in his statement:

> I looked at the activity I was engaged in as related to installation or performance, because the set or the model I used was temporary, and the image of the set was what most viewers experienced. And that was true for performance artists and installation artists at the time. (Casebere 2001)

The models he creates have, over time, developed into more refined objects, allowing less of the obvious processes of model-making to show. His recognition as an artist who works with models may be part of the reason for this. It is no longer necessary for the artist to explain himself. Here he talks of his early model-making process:

> … part of my program early on was that the seams had to show. That you would suspend disbelief when looking at the object or the image, but the way it was made still had to be clear to the viewer. My models were always clearly models. This is a Constructivist idea; you don't hide the construction. (Casebere 2001)

Much of Casebere's body of work is subtly, and at times more overtly, political. On the surface his images are often beautiful and calm, however much of his work has focused on the politics of prisons and incarceration, sites of slavery and the dark colonial histories of America. This connection to historic trauma through the production of models that may or may not present as beautiful objects is very much within the world of my scenographic photographic practice. Like the work of Casebere, my work has often included water and darkness as leitmotifs within the framework of a historic 'real' site. For Casebere, water acts as a metaphor for the passage of time. It speaks of temporality and emotion. Darkness exists for both myself and Casebere as, like Brook's 'aesthetic of darkness', an interpretive strategy of reading the world from a dark position (Brooks 2006). In discussing his work centred on Thomas Jefferson's plantation estate Monticello, and its dark history of slavery, Casebere states:

> ... we need to look beyond the myth of what Jefferson represents, and that's what the darkness you see is about. It's about the end of the myth. The end of the idealization of a founding father. (Casebere 2001)

The work of German artist Oliver Boberg, like Casebere, presents photographs of models of mostly vacant architectural sites. One of the significant differences between the two artists is that Boberg rarely uses darkness as a tool in capturing his work. His images of bleak, banal urban sites often allude to some form of neglect or suffering. Unlike Casebere, these tend to be flooded with light, exposing the structures for all their perceived brutality. His buildings commonly reference the architecture of post-war Germany. His construction of models and photographic images have an elegant formalism to them which is often juxtaposed with the aesthetically challenging content. His lighting of spaces creates less of a

theatrical effect than Casebere, however the soft washed-out light he predominately uses has more of a realistic cinematic, atmospheric quality. The tenuous balance between beauty and ugliness is exposed in all its glory. The viewer's expectations are toyed with by the uncanny nature of the work. In his catalogue note for the Guggenheim it states:

> Boberg's suggestion is that we approach images with models of what we expect to see already in mind, models that photographs merely confirm, models like the ones that the artist constructs. (Guggenheim 2017)

Image subject to copyright

Fig.43. Oliver Boberg, *Underpass* (1997) c-print, 40cm x 50cm

It should be noted that Boberg's finished works, unlike Casebere, show very little evidence of their reality as constructed models. In being so successful in his reproductions of sites, the knowing viewer is left to ponder questions of reality, authenticity and the power of perception. His skill and precision within the craft of model-making connects with Christian Hubert's notion of 'jealousy' within the representation of models.

> The 'jealousy' of the model is perhaps most explicit in photographs of models which are virtually indistinguishable from photographs of buildings. The intervention of another form of seemingly motivated representation – namely photography – reinforces the claim to verisimilitude. But the truth of the model does not lie in its referential nature since as simulacrum the model denies the possibilities of its own autonomous objecthood and establishes the building as the ultimate referent, as a reality beyond representation. (Hubert 1981)

Boberg's urban spaces are devoid of life, creating a bleak, impersonal emptiness in which we, the viewers, feel uncomfortable and unwelcome being a part of these 'public spaces'. Like Boberg, the constructed content explored within this PhD research project often looks to sites that lack the aesthetic beauty of Casebere's constructed sites. Public toilets, graffiti-laden laneways and dirty creek beds are presented as sites that attempt to contrast the beauty of the theatrically illuminated model with the often abject nature of the environment.

Fig.44. Thomas Demand, *Flur / Corridor* (1996) c-print, 184.1cm x 270.3cm

Thomas Demand, another German practitioner who uses model-making and photography, differs from both Boberg and Casebere in that his

models tend to be life-sized. Like Casebere, his work is often highly politicised, the sites he explores tend to come (usually) from pre-existing mass media images. Some examples of this are *Poll,* which recreated the Florida centre in which the recount for the USA 2000 elections occurred; *Room,* which recreates the bunker room in which the last attempt on Hitler's life took place; *Kitchen,* which depicts Saddam Hussein's hideaway; *Corridor,* which depicts the corridor to serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer's home, and *Office,* which shows the headquarters of the Stasi secret police. It has been asked why Demand provides little detail of the specifics in his titles of which he has said:

> I never made a mystery of it, if people asked me I would say. But if you label it becomes too much like Madame Tussaud's – people compare before and after. I don't really need to have a big plaque saying this is about such and such. I didn't make a piece about Jeffrey Dahmer, I just did something about the knowledge that you and I have about him. (Demand 2006)

Demand constructs all his models using paper and cardboard. Being life-sized, this process extends to the props and set dressings within his depicted scenes. This effect generates an uncanny surreality of the 'normal'. This use of materials and scale works with Demand's assertion that the models themselves are ephemeral, once photographed he destroys all his constructions. Demand's images, unlike those of Boberg, tend to be devoid of textural details. The books, notes, packaging and pictures he creates within his scenes tend to be blank, devoid of any text, they highlight the architecture and acknowledge their existence as models. This technique encourages the viewer to fill in the blanks, aware that these images are constructed realities, the artist's summarisation of the sites question our cultural and individual memories.

> There isn't anyone in Demand's photographs, although they are often much concerned with history, historical events, places that might be regarded as momentous. The traces of human presence, and of events, are everywhere, even though it is an absolute and generic anonymity that strikes you first of all. (Searle 2005)

Through the practice of constructing and photographing models, like the three artists discussed, I have been very conscious of what is important to be made explicit within these constructed environments. Like Demand, I have opted for simple titles, which refer only to the geographic location of the sites of interest and not the historic events I allude to. This work is always consciously presenting itself as a model, and although on a quick glance some viewers may not immediately realise this, on close reading and inspection, the process of model-making becomes much more apparent.

When photographing models, the effects of scale become complex. Rachel Wells, in *Scale in contemporary sculpture,* discusses how the effects of scale in constructed miniatures and enlargements may be nullified by the use of a camera that utilises its own exaggerations of scale in the reproduction process. This expectation of a distorted scale when presenting photographs tends to have a way of rendering all objects the same size (Wells 2013, p. 119). It is precisely this 'complication of scale' that many artists working with models, including myself, embrace and explore through the reproduction of photographic imagery. Walter Benjamin describes the nature of scale within photography:

> Everyone will have noticed how much easier it is to get hold of a picture, more particularly a piece of sculpture, not to mention architecture, in a photograph than in reality … They can no longer be regarded as the work of individuals; they have become a collective creation, a corpus so vast it can be assimilated only through miniaturisation. In the final analysis, mechanical

> reproduction is a technique of diminution that helps men to achieve a control over works of art whose aid they could no longer be used. (Benjamin 2009, p. 235)

Benjamin's assertion that it is easier to grasp something, literally and figuratively, in two-dimensional form is an interesting proposition when exploring the work of artists who work in three dimensions with the sole purpose of presenting their art in a two-dimensional format. When we look at a photograph of a model, we are forced to adhere to the artist's point of view. In scenographic terms, the sightlines are fixed, and we are only allowed the various details the photographer chooses to share. Mark Morris, in *Models: architecture and the miniature*, believes that scale models and photography are in fact allies; they both deal with relative size and spatial relationships and both artforms are representational and can allude to impossible worlds (Morris 2006).

In exploring the power and allure of the scale model, I draw on theorists who have focused on 'the miniature' as an ongoing field of research. Susan Stewart, in *On longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection,* says:

> In its tableaulike from, the miniature is a world of arrested time; its stillness emphasizes the activity that is outside its borders. And the effect is reciprocal, for once we attend to the miniature world, the outside world stops and is lost to us. (Stewart 1984, p. 67)

Stewart asserts that the worlds created by miniatures rely on individual fantasy as opposed to physical circumstances for those engaging. The miniature world encourages us to disassociate ourselves from the outside 'real' world, as we did with abandon as children, and engage with the fantasy presented. Within my practice, I have been conscious of creating these miniature worlds as islands, worlds that are contained and floated

within a dark body of water. This practice fits comfortably within Stewart's belief that:

> As is the case with all models, it is absolutely necessary that Lilliput be an island. The miniature world remains perfect and uncontaminated by the grotesque so long as its absolute boundaries are maintained. (Stewart 1984, p. 68)

Within my practice all my self-contained worlds, in model form, are partially reflected. These islands only allude to an expanse of water. The island and its small body of water are themselves contained within the black void of its square composition. The act of miniaturisation is further enhanced by the 'universe' within which they are placed. This universe is the expansive imaginative world of my Wonderland and the darkness it inhabits. This world plays with Baudrillard's idea that it is the deception of unreality that visitors to miniature worlds find reassuring (Wells 2013, p. 131). He uses Disneyland as the ultimate example of simulacra:

> Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra. It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms (Baudrillard 1994, p. 12)

Baudrillard sees Disneyland as a simulation of the third order, where the real is no longer real. The conscious link, to the historic *Wonderland City* amusement park site and its conceptual basis for my body of work, is one of the significant differences between my scenographic photography and that of Demand, Boberg and Casebere who tend to operate within narrower frameworks within their collective canons of work. The constructed models and worlds created within my Wonderland form part of a larger performed scenographic 'universe' where the final physical form of the works (visual text) become a singular model when exhibited within the 14 Stations of Wonderland.

STATION 12
STAGING THE WORK

SCENOGRAPHY AS METHODOLOGY

In his essay 'The future of scenography', Arnold Aronson describes scenography as a swinging pendulum, at either ends of the swinging arc are 'space' and 'image'. We know space as the delineated area in which we contain the theatrical and the spectator. This ephemeral space encloses, contains and isolates the spectator from the outside world, creating a new inhabitable space. Image aims to create a particular locale, which may be metaphoric, psychological, representational, generic or any manner of combinations. As the pendulum travels its arc it is only at its extremes that anything is absolute (Aronson 2010). It is this tension between image and space that is intrinsic within my scenographic photographic staging. My scenographic 'image' is one that consists not just of photographic images but also of a suggestion of locale, the visualisation of my Wonderland. Both image and space occupy the metaphoric and psychological realms. How the body moves through the space and negotiates with other bodies and the presented work is vital in creating a visual narrative.

Thea Brejzek, in discussing *Expanded scenography*, proposes that spectator, artist and curator are all equal accomplices in the 'authoring of space' (Brejzek, T 2011, p.8). When looking at the curation of scenography, she describes the act and process as being more like an infection of spaces as opposed to a cure. To Brejzek, 'infection' equals ideas and practices that embrace unpredictable outcomes, especially prevalent in scenographic spaces that are multi-authored, untested and that rely on an

unpredictable engagement with participants (Brejzek 2011). This concept of a space becoming infected by the introduction of multiple authorial perspectives is important within my practice. It allows for a new and expanded scenographic engagement with photography that would not exist outside the traditional white cube gallery.

In exploring the scenographic within this practice-based research, Lehmann's *Postdramatic theatre* (2006) is a useful text for beginning to define the framework within which this practice might exist. He articulates the postdramatic as that which ignores the modernist preoccupation with textual, fictional or narrative-based theatre. The development of 'visual dramaturgy' as a tool in the crafting of theatre/live-art is an important methodology in creating work that is not subordinated to the written dramatic text. This allows creative practice (the theatre of images) the freedom to develop its own logic (Lehmann 2006, p. 93). Paul Monaghan explains that historically, within the presentation of 'drama', there has tended to be a distinct separation between the 'world' of the drama and the 'world' of the auditorium. Within the scenography of 'postdramatic theatre' this separation is often disintegrated, creating a performance space that is continuous and contiguous with the viewer space, performer and audience sharing the same world (Monaghan 2010, p. 248).

> Postdramatic scenography does not set out to create a separate world; rather it uses the tools of scenography to set up a dialogue, not between characters within the dramatic world, but with the 'visitors' to the postdramatic space. (Monaghan 2010, p. 248)

This concept of the blurring of performer and audience boundaries is important to my Wonderland. The potential for exhibiting performance/scenography/photography outside the habitualised

environment of the theatre and white box gallery will allow for a 'new' mode of performer/audience engagement.

In considering scenography as a practice that can happily exist outside of the theatre and within exhibition spaces, I am drawn to Elcio Rossini's (2012) assertion that scenography used in museums and galleries need not limit itself to being purely representational, a simulation and/or theatrical. Rossini believes that scenography has moved beyond the pictorial representation of three-dimensional space and now exists not just as an instrument for representing spaces, places and objects and that its application is no longer restricted to the language of theatre. What Rossini has noticed, however, is the use of the term scenography within museum contexts has allowed for various misunderstandings and outdated preconceptions pertaining to the role and purpose of scenography as being purely representational (Rossini 2012). Scenographic representation is more expansive than this narrow definition and is not confined to existing as a substitution of an original but exists also as a narrative element that aids the spatial/temporal thematics of the performance or exhibition. In using scenography within exhibition spaces, we introduce the conceptual dimension of the space, suggesting rhythms and atmospheres generated by spatial organisation, lighting and sound.

This 'new' thinking aligns with Mckinney and Iball's research methods in scenography:

> Emphasising the spatial and sensory aspects, contemporary use of the term moves away from thinking of design as decoration of the stage and locates scenography as an integral component of performance or as a mode of performance itself. (McKinney & Iball 2011, p. 111)

Within Wonderland, scenography becomes a mode of performance. As discussed earlier, the photographs act as a 'visual text' that performs alongside the audience/spectators. The highly reflective surfaces throughout the space 'perform' like mirrors. As the spectator engages with various images, not only do they see themselves inside the photograph, they also see other people and works reflected and shifting. They cannot look into the works without placing themselves within the photographic worlds.

This research project further draws upon Mckinney and Iball's strategies for scenographic research (McKinney & Iball 2011, p. 115), these strategies being:

- Retrospective review of scenographic practice archives
- Exploration of tacit and embodied knowledge within scenographic practice
- Exploration of strategies for 'spatial thinking'
- Investigation of practice-based approaches to audience response
- Scenographic writing (potentially for a means of reflecting on practice-based research)

I now offer some examples in order to demonstrate how I have utilised these proposed strategies within my own practice-based research.

RETROSPECTIVE REVIEW OF SCENOGRAPHIC PRACTICES / ARCHIVES

Throughout this research I have utilised the scenographic research methodology of analysing existing pictorial records and writing related to historic scenographic work as a means to inform my own practice. This is evidenced throughout this exegesis in the various thematic stations where I draw on existing artists' work to help place my Wonderland within the transgeneric fields I explore (scenographic photography, staged photography, constructed photography, queer representation etc.).

Image subject to copyright

Fig.45. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #153* (1985) c-print, 166.4cm x 120.7cm

EXPLORATION OF TACIT AND EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE WITHIN SCENOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

In creating my 'scenographic space' for exhibition I bring with me a tacit knowledge of manipulating space for performance that is partially derived from my 25-year career and training as a theatre/television designer and photographer and partially derived from my 46 years of observing and

experiencing life. It is difficult to analyse this embodied knowledge within a traditional research paradigm as often the resulting rationale and reasoning for exploring a particular scenographic approach is unable to be succinctly explained in words. Donald Schön (1983) suggests we:

> … search, instead, for an epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict. (Schön 1983, p. 49)

This intuitive quality inherent to much design/artistic development requires a faith in ones own embodied knowledge. I have used this tacit knowledge in much of my research, from the physical construction of model 'realities' and the way light transforms through to the spatial realising of my 'visual text'. This intuitive process is further exemplified through my tacit understanding, through lived experience, of how gay men negotiate 'queer space' and the potential of danger. Within Wonderland this knowledge manifests itself through the spatial organising of my exhibited work. The space of Wonderland becomes a scenographic canvas where the positioning of photographs is determined by how bodies may interact with work and other bodies, in a way that is reminiscent of how men negotiate maze spaces within 'cruise clubs'.[12] The physical space of Wonderland is consciously adapted (like a constructed 'beat' within a cruise club) to create an environment where an aspect of the spectator's movement requires a journey into the potentially uncomfortable labyrinth. For spectators familiar with the embodied experience of cruising, this may prove a very different experience to the

[12] Cruise clubs are gay venues that provide a safe place for cruising for sex. Familiar to many of these venues is the inclusion of a darkened maze that men negotiate in the ritualised process of finding a sexual partner.

spectator who does not have the familiarity of the beat to draw conscious and subconscious reference from.

Another critical example of my reliance on and utilisation of tacit and embodied knowledge exists within my choosing and developing of specific sites to explore through scenographic photography. Each of the sites of reference resonate with me on a personal and affective level. For instance the work *Inverlochy Place (diorama)* shows the model of an external garage within a small urban street on the fringe of central Wellington. In 1999, 14-year-old Jeff Whittington was on his way home from a party early in the morning when two men offered him a ride home but instead drove to Inverlochy Place, dragged him out of the car and beat him savagely, it is presumed because he appeared to be gay with purple hair and nail polish. Jeff died in hospital the following day. During this horrific event I was also living nearby in Wellington and felt personally shaken by the senseless barbarism happening on my doorstep. I was forced to acknowledge that my home city was not as safe and accepting as I had believed. This and countless other examples of homophobia, extreme and more insidious, local and foreign, remain entrenched within my psyche.

Each of my sites explored tell stories of trauma that have in some way affected me, sometimes through my remembrance of when and where they happened, but equally through researching and realising my unfamiliarity with some of the historic events. With some sites this unfamiliarity is concerning because it highlights how a lack of media attention for certain cases of homophobic violence and/or murder render particular lives more worthy than others. The creation of my scenographic

photography brings with it my embodied response to our queer histories of marginalisation, systemic violence, brutality and discrimination.

EXPLORATION OF STRATEGIES FOR 'SPATIAL THINKING'

Thinking spatially has been a critical method within my research throughout each of its various phases and iterations. In breaking down the specific examples of this I will look at the three different stages of my research that it is most explicit within.

CONCEPTUALISATION/DESIGN STAGE

Within the initial conceptualisation stage, drawings, renderings and models are created prior to photographing as a means of evaluating and developing ideas. This requires a spatial and visual approach to the generation of conceptual content. Drawing and model-making are used as processes for cultivating and evaluating ideas and content.

Fig.46. Sean Coyle, *Site study Inverlochy Place* (2016) pen and watercolour on paper, 21cm x 29.7cm

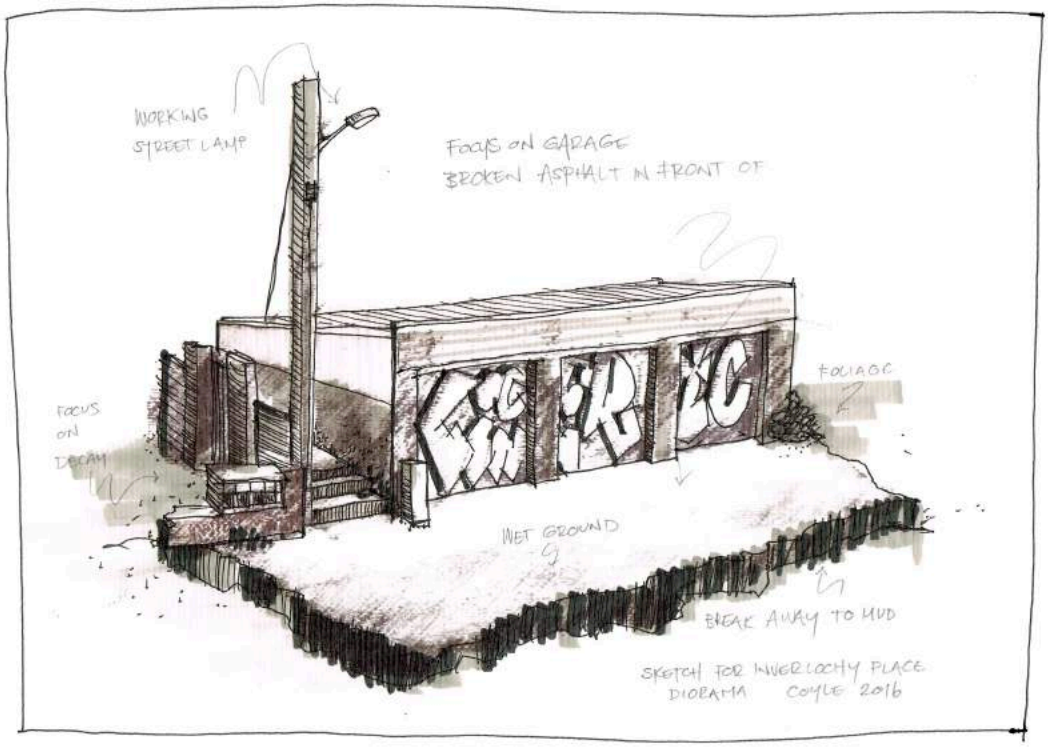


Fig.47. Sean Coyle, Sketch for Inverlochy Place model (2016) pencil, pen and markers on paper, 21cm x 29.7cm

Fig.48. Sean Coyle, *Model construction of Little Oxford St* (2018) mixed-media

PHOTOGRAPHIC STAGE

This spatial thinking is next utilised within the lighting and photographing of the diorama model, where the spatiality of constructed environment is further enhanced through the sculpting of three-dimensional object/s by means of lighting. It is during this stage that a series of spatial camera tests are done to determine the position of the model in relation to the camera view. Once the position is determined, the sculpting through lighting occurs. With all of these dioramas I begin with total darkness and add specific texturing through light, creating an illuminated island within the black void.

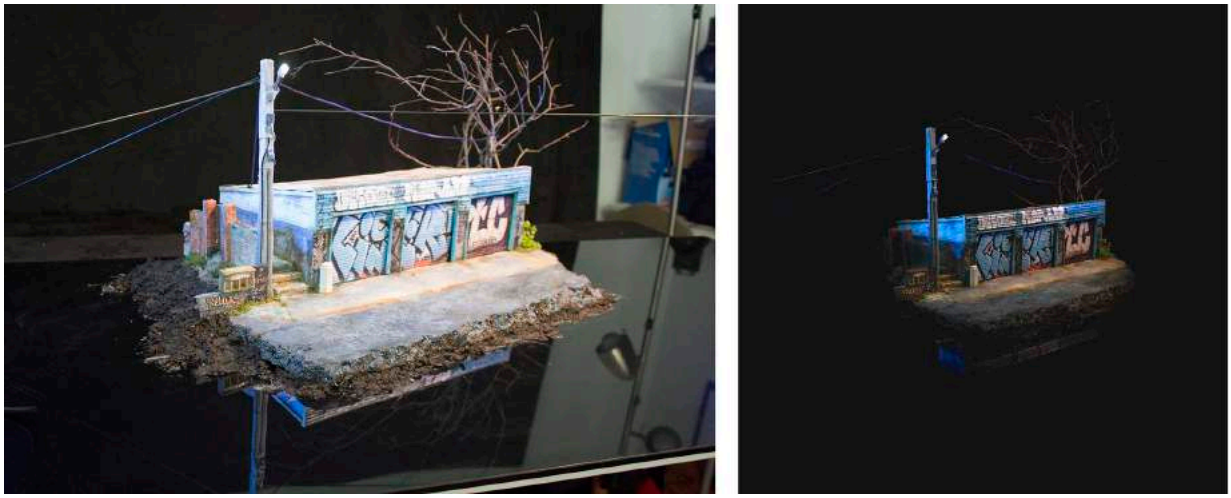


Fig.49. Sean Coyle, *Pre and post lighting photographs of Inverlochy Place: diorama* (2017)

PRESENTATION STAGE

Finally, spatial thinking is utilised in the evaluation and development of scenographic space for exhibiting work. This is achieved, again, through modelling and drawing, and in particular through the siting of actual photographs within the digital, walk-through model.

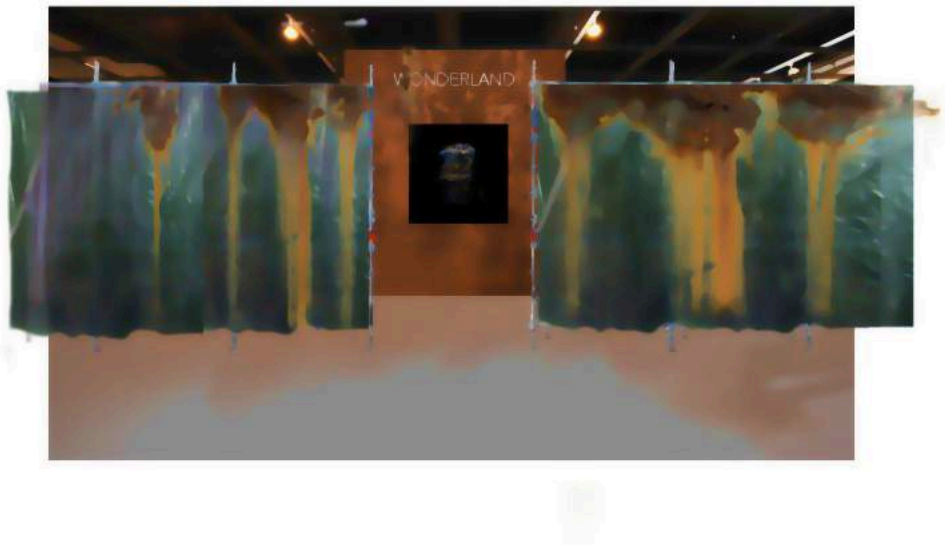


Fig.50. Sean Coyle, *Concept drawing for Wonderland entrance Academy Gallery Inveresk* (2018) digital still

INVESTIGATION OF PRACTICE-BASED APPROACHES TO AUDIENCE RESPONSE

Fig.51. Sean Coyle, *Insitu photograph of Wonderland research laboratory* (2018)

As with much scenographic research, developing ways of investigating and evaluating audience response to and engagement with presented work is a critical component of the research process. Within the development of my Wonderland series I staged a lab to investigate the following:

1. How invited 'audience' might engage with a selection of individual photographic works
2. How audience might move through an extremely dark environment
3. How surface reflections, deliberate and accidental, impact on audience experience

4. How specific lighting may draw or deter an audience member to work/s
5. How the spatial relationships between individual works informed how people moved
6. If audience felt like they were experiencing a new way of looking at and experiencing photography outside the white gallery walls.

This particular lab took place within the Annexe Theatre Studio, as the space is a black box equipped with a full lighting grid. The space itself allowed me to observe how spectators moved within the space from the vantage point of the balcony, where I was able to control the lighting. Within this lab, five diorama works were suspended from a grid and backed with mirrors. Each of the diorama images were tightly spotlighted, this being the only source of lighting within the studio.

The following are notes compiled through observing and informal conversations with each of the visitors to the lab.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT WITH DARKNESS

I noticed that within the darkened space that all of the visitors moved slowly and cautiously. One visitor commented that on entering the unfamiliar, darkened space they were instantly filled with uncertainty, as they could not initially establish where the walls of the space started and ended. This anxiety subsided somewhat as his eyes adjusted and some of the light that bounced off exhibited photographs allowed a subtle sense of the architecture to emerge. Another visitor felt the dark experience played on our primal instincts—to become more aware, alert and cautious. Within the darkness all the visitors talked in hushed tones, many found it difficult to discuss the work with me in the darkened environment but were

very happy to once the working lights of the studio were turned on. During each of the visits I played with varying the intensity of lighting on the suspended images, and a general consensus amongst visitors was that with more light the presentation felt less successful as it diminished the effect of the individual images floating, suspended in space. Another issue encountered by too much light was the light that bounced from the images created less of an intimate feel with the individual works. When there was less light on images a number of the visitors felt there was a risk of disorientation within the space and that they found it difficult to properly 'read' the work.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT WITH REFLECTIVE SURFACES

Within the lab presentation I presented some works with a reflective front and others with no glass or acrylic, printed on a matte paper. Some visitors felt that their own reflections within the images were potentially distracting to their engagement. Other visitors found this an interesting and compelling device in which they were personally connected to the sites through their hovering reflection. The suspended mirror backs of the images created an interesting response from visitors. Many of the visitors mentioned the reflected duplication of images was an interesting device that took them out of a traditional art-viewing paradigm. Some comments about mirrors from visitors were that they increased the performative quality of the work and they made them feel like they were an immersive part of the exhibition. One visitor asked whether the duplication of the sites through multiple reflections was to create a continuum of the trauma presented within the content of the work. Most visitors felt the suspended mirrors had some spatial connection with the funhouse maze of mirrors, one visitor said they connected also with the queer 'cruise club' maze. A

number of visitors said the mirrors added to the creation of 'psychological space' where they, in seeing themselves within the Wonderland world of trauma found themselves thinking about their place/position within the content presented. It was also noted that the mirrors had a voyeuristic effect, whereby some people were able to observe how others engaged with the space through observing reflections (and reflections of reflections).

LAB CONCLUSIONS

The experiments with lighting and reflection within this lab proved successful for the ongoing research. It was generally opined that the experience of viewing and participating within the small selection of suspended works allowed for a new way of experiencing and seeing exhibited photography. Many of the visitors described the encounter as aligned to a museum and or theatre experience where the dark space and specific lighting felt most suitable for the style of the photographs presented. The majority stated that the overall experience could be enhanced through the use of a soundscape, and that the aural experience is more of an expectation when viewing something within a darkened environment where all the senses are more heightened.

SCENOGRAPHIC WRITING

The use of writing as a scenographic research tool is often ignored within the highly visual/spatial/performative world of scenography and performance design. McKinney and Iball describe 'scenographic writing' as being:

> Performative writing that focuses on the scenographic draws on the researcher's responses to the multiple dimensions of the event, and to the constituent parts of the performance environment. Ventures into scenographic research of this kind aim to describe the event – or, rather, the author's recall of the experience – by reflective and evocative means. (McKinney & Iball 2011, p. 31)

Where Mckinney and Iball use this research technique often to write retrospectively about scenographic works, I am interested in how performative writing can be used as a practice-based research tool within the creation of scenographic photography. Finding a 'performative' approach to writing about scenography, performance and site has led me to experiment with prose as a means for attempting to emotionally and conceptually position myself as multidisciplinary artist within the worlds of queer trauma I draw upon. This process of writing, inspired by a workshop on site writing with Jane Rendall in 2016, has allowed me to begin to think spatially and scenographically with the written text. Placing myself as author within the worlds of the sites I focus on allows me another tool to use in the perceiving of the spatial and psychological spaces.

The following are some examples of this technique:

#1

But why this particular ghost now?
The rippled mirror image emits,
Keep seeking within the ocean surge
He whispers to his reflection.

The collective sneer carried by wind,
The young men gesticulate.
Keep throwing that footy around,
He whispers to his reflection.

In time with the beat of surf below,
The hot steps up the zig-zag path,
Keep climbing till you reach the spot
He whispers to his reflection.

In time with the whistle through trees,
The ritual layout of his towel and things,
Keep scanning till you identify,
He whispers to his reflection.

The long hazy beat of drowsiness,
The stretch out of his limbs,
Keep awake otherwise you will miss out,
He whispers to his reflection.

But why do these demons congregate?
The illuminated emerge from darkness,
Keep struggling and questioning,
He whispers to his reflection.

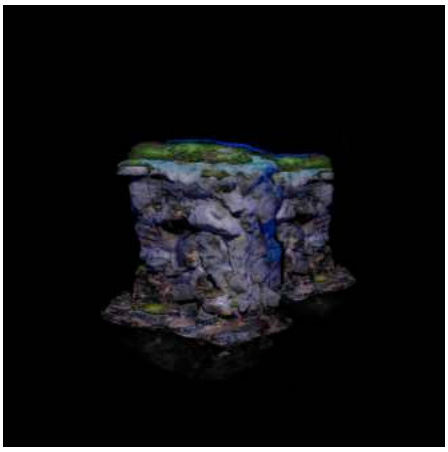


Fig.52

#2

Fig.53

And you saw him see you from the corner of your eye, so you opened the door.
And you cast numerous glances his way; which occasionally he
met.

And you saw his cock grow hard in his hand so you got closer within arm's length.
And you were sure he would be kindly blunt so you reached out to touch him.
And you were not surprised when he brushed your hand away so he could
continue.

And you later noticed his wedding ring as he pressed your head down.
And you were sure he wouldn't turn after you gave him some relief.
And you said thanks but he didn't respond so you offered him a smile.
but.

All you saw was his face of contempt.

And you wondered what the hell next.

#3

He likes the walks by the river.

He likes the ritual freedom of them.

He likes the space after writing all day.

He likes the dressing up of certain desires.

	In a Golden Haze.
There is his Dionysus.	Excess and Vigour.
There is his Arcadia.	Shaft of Light.
There is his Sylvian bed.	Fern to Lay.
There is his Divine.	Sweat of Labour.
There is his Oblivion.	Grapes of Wrath.

Fig.54

He likes the moment that God abandons him.

He likes the process of a regained propriety.

He likes the mythology of his secret world.

He likes the walk back home by the river way.

He likes the solitude of a simple evening meal.

He likes the fine wine and a book well read.

McKinney and Iball's strategies for scenographic research are all valuable in the outcome of this particular research project. Scenography allows for a critical thinking to emerge, where the tension between image and space is considered, evaluated and executed through practice. Like Aronson's pendulum, both image and space occupy the metaphoric and psychological realms. Critical to this visualisation of Wonderland is how bodies move through and navigate this scenographic space. In exploring the ritualised physical journey of how the spectator experiences this I draw on the traditions of the 14 Stations of the Cross.

THE 14 STATIONS

The Stations of the Cross is a predominately Catholic devotional exercise which involves the participant moving from station to station whilst spiritually engaging with each of the presented tableaux, each depicting a moment in the narrative of Jesus's passion and death. The term 'station' is used as an instruction, a place to halt, requiring a physical transition from one station to the next. In walking the stations the spectator becomes an active participant in the pictorial narrative.

The origins of the Stations of the Cross, trace back to the 4th century when Christian worshippers undertook a pilgrimage to various holy sites. In time this physical act of exploring one's devotion through walking and reflecting became known as walking the Via Dolorosa (the Way of Sorrows). The stations have a strong connection to the theatrical as the story told within the stations has and still is (since Medieval times) performed as the Passion play. By the end of the 17th century this form of devotion had become common within churches, where stations, in either simple crucifix form or more elaborate pictorial representations, became a

more accessible means for the faithful to walk a personal pilgrimage of reflection and penance.

In placing the stations within a sacred and ritualistic space like a church, it is assumed that the participant has knowledge of the associated physical and devotional practices required to successfully become closer to God through their empathetic connection with the representation of the condemnation and subsequent crucifixion of Jesus.

> Their art is always resolutely in the present; it demands a very different conceptual engagement, situating both the viewer and the Stations in a liminal space between ritual and motif. (Cahill 2015, p. 33)

Throughout this research project the stations have become a valuable example of how pictorial representation and narrative can be utilised within a scenographic environment in an attempt to address historic cases of trauma. The Stations of the Cross become the ultimate martyr story, where empathetically connecting with Jesus's suffering becomes a means for the religious to become closer to 'God'. In my Wonderland stations, the martyr story is told more post-dramatically (not relying on a traditional, literal/linear narrative) through a collection of queer narratives where the abject, queer martyr is elevated to religious, mythic status. This appropriation of the Stations of the Cross within visual art practice is not a new phenomenon.

> This has been especially true of the Stations of the Cross. As an artistic motif, the Stations navigate between church and gallery by surrendering the traditional form while retaining the rich connotations of the underlying narrative. The reinterpretations traverse boundaries and expand upon the ritual's numinous core. (Cahill 2015, p. 1)

In the Wonderland stations, like the Christian Stations of the Cross, each resting place presents an image to be contemplated. The key connection between the traditional stations and Wonderland is they both share a desire for societal understanding and empathy. Like Jesus's journey to crucifixion, the victims of homophobic violence and murders lives cannot be in vain. The Wonderland stations, through their conscious queering, attempt to become a catalyst for social and political change.

The appropriation of Christian language and ritual has a lengthy queer history. On Sydney's northern beaches, a selection of public toilets were known by frequenters as 'the Stations of the Cross'. In Melbourne a service canteen next to St Pauls Cathedral was known as 'the confessional'. These examples both play with the camp/political tradition of disidentification, where the normative is manipulated to suit the needs of the minorative subject (Muñoz, J. 1999).

The stations (of both the Christian church and of Wonderland) rely on aesthetic stimulation to encourage the audience to fully engage. The objects need to be alluring and compelling. They have to be desirous as objects within themselves, almost despite their content. The object of each individual station, and collectively as a series, needs to have a heightened and refined aesthetic. The Wonderland installation, whilst visually compelling, exposes a meditative and contemplative quality and function. The stations evoke mystery and are catalysts for visual, conceptual and emotional interrogation and investigation.

The Wonderland series of photographs are not as fixed or literal as the Christian Stations of the Cross, which usually provides succinct re-enactments of Jesus's journey of martyrdom. In Wonderland the audience/viewer has to work harder in excavating meaning from the

installation, in comparison to the religious framework it borrows from. The use of the 14 stations construct is an important, emotional and analytical reference point for the spectator.

There are various potential audience expectations when applying the device of 14 stations within the installation. There is an expectation that the individual elements are part of a whole narrative and that each station acts like a 'storyboard'. There is an expectation that there is likely 'a moral to the story'. There is possibly an associative expectation that the hidden narratives, or signified content within the photographs, have a correlation to the theme of martyrdom, this being the predominant narrative thematic in the 14 Stations of the Cross. The Wonderland stations want to be devotional and contemplative. They desire the elicitation of emotions, even if this is initially on the basis that these emotions are a result of a pleasing or affecting experience resulting from the 'feeling' of the journey through the spatial and aesthetic effect on the senses. This visual allure is a crucial device to give importance and significance to the grand gesture of the Wonderland stations, the expectation of 'significance' having been established by the use of the religious devotional construct.

There is 'wonder' in each station in the Wonderland installation. This exists within the pursuit of the unknown, in this case the embedded queer narratives, the queer martyr stories and the desire to discover the exact, historical reference points to these embedded moments of queer trauma. The 'wonder' is also aided by inference and signification via the dioramas, model figures and surrogate objects of significance. This referential strategy, compositionally and aesthetically treated for ease of visual digestion, encourages the audience to be compelled to investigate, decipher and extract meaning from the stations.

The availability of support material such as artist statement and or curatorial summary and quantification are crucial aids for the audience/spectator to further recognise the works' political and social relevance, engendering an emphatic response to a queer perspective, and thus providing opportunity for individual and collective understanding.

As with the archaic 14 Stations of the Cross, the Wonderland stations encourage the ritual and the devotional. They desire a patronage, a possible conversion to a subscribed ideal and the pilgrimage to a place of worship. They desire to instruct and guide the masses in a seductive, visually alluring way, to convey a morality through a story of sacrifice and martyrdom.

The Wonderland stations exist, in many ways, as a surrogate queer 'church'. This church is a quasi-spiritual space in which the scenographic photographs are presented and give voice to the many martyrs, allowing for a collective outcry of pain and suffering and sacrifice. This outcry from Wonderland pleads for and asserts the need for positive social and political change.

Fig.55. Sean Coyle, *St Sebastian #2* (2017) digital image

STATION 13
CRUISING WONDERLAND AT THE PAH

SOLO EXHIBITION AT WALLACE TRUST ARTS CENTRE

This station further explores the work exhibited in February–April 2017 at the Wallace Trust Arts Centre at the Pah Homestead in Auckland, New Zealand. This exhibition was scheduled to coincide with the annual Auckland Pride festival of which, in recent years, the Wallace Trust Arts Centre has become a significant site for the artistic component of the festival. Having, during the first two years of my research project, developed a body of photographic work, the opportunity to stage an initial exhibition within a prominent public gallery seemed like an excellent way to initially present my creative output to the public. Given the restrictions on the gallery space, I opted for presenting the photographs within a traditional manner, as a first iteration, where I could garner feedback and reflect on the photographs themselves before moving on to develop them further and look at how they could be then presented within a more performative, scenographic space.

The exhibition was concerned with cruising an imaginative landscape for powerful little truths. It was an investigative, queer reading of faded and buried historical homophobic horror. The various elements within this iteration of Wonderland wavered between the inferred, codified and signified, between light and dark and the subjective grey area of success and failure. *Cruising Wonderland* 2017 was immersive and reflective by virtue of the content and the nature of the works themselves. All of the subject matter presented in photographic form emerged from black. The tyranny of the black void represented a primal fear, the theatre of the

doomed spectacle, the void for which to be subjugated or, paradoxically, an opportunity in which to emerge and be validated. This tension between commemoration and celebration of aesthetic and conceptual content was the driving mechanism and impetus of the exhibition.

Many of the works struggled for full illumination. This aesthetic struggle within much of my scenographic photography is paramount to my methodology, as illumination equals clarity and conversely the non-illuminated content signifies both forces of oppression and a struggle to 'see' sense within the history of the place. As discussed throughout this exegesis, these locations of trauma are faded memorials that demand societal awareness and consciousness. They are laments, inferring not only the waste of life and opportunity of the murdered and/or beaten gay men but also the wilful heteronormative mechanisms for which to conveniently minimise or outright deny recognition and justice.

Fig.56. Sean Coyle, *Still Life* (2016) dye sublimation print, 80cm x 80cm

The exhibition invited the viewer into an inherently dark Wonderland, but also invited the viewer to participate in conceptual and visual play. This play included a range of visual devices, from the production of still life with a nod to dead queer artists (fig.56.), to the subverting of religious iconography, glitter blood and the playing with dolls and figurines. Other works such as *Finch*, *Pig Mask*, *Dead Bird* and *Bad Apple* offered a more symbolic and generic reading. These works punctuated and counterbalanced the more direct references to actual historic violence. In many ways they embodied the martyr, or at least the idea of the beauty and suffering of life distilled and suspended into a singular gesture.

Fig.57. Sean Coyle, *Finch* (2016) pigment print, 80cm x 80cm

Fig.58. Sean Coyle, *Descent triptych* (2016) 3 x pigment prints, 60cm x 180cm

The triptych *Descent* is the only work which had the subject matter not fully surrounded in black space. Depicting sequential images of a male youth falling, it succeeded in figuratively and conceptually reordering the hierarchy of object depicted and the negative space of the black void. This hierarchical figuration of the object and content offered a duality of associations and readings. On one hand the viewer within the context of this exhibition could read the young man's fall as a forced one as a result of violence but an alternative view is celebratory, which speaks of youthful vitality, freedom and expression.

It is this ambiguity of associative connections between lightness and darkness, violence and liberation I further explore within the scenographic staging of my final PhD creative outcome *The 14 Stations of Wonderland*.

PART V

CONCLUSION

STATION 14
CONCLUSION

This research project has attempted to explore, through a practice-based methodology, how scenography can allow for new visceral readings and experiences of photography when presented off the gallery walls and placed within deliberately staged performative environments. This exploration has been used to offer possibilities for how to effectively and affectively present photography that predominately focus on representations of historic sites of queer trauma. The resulting body of work, whilst being a tangible record of my research journey, also becomes a type of memorialised archive, where sites are temporarily given significance beyond their normative existence. *Bondi Cliffs* for example, through Wonderland, moves to being more than just a representation of the tourist mecca and icon of Australiana beach culture, it becomes a sombre reminder of our recent dark history of violence, ignorance and hate.

The exhibiting of my Wonderland stations is transformative, in that they act as a potential catalyst for political, moral and social transformation. The exhibition is transformative, also, in a physical sense, through the site specific architectural intervention where the metamorphosis of the white walled gallery into a surreal, theatrical, scenographic installation redefines, reassigns, alters and recontextualises the institutional gallery space. The exhibition, by virtue of the alternate scenographic realism, invites the viewer to engage with the scenographic photography in a fresh, unique and potentially affective way. It is transformative, also, in the way it invites

(forces) the viewer to be a non passive participant within the environment. The viewer is a 'performer' within the 'performance' space.

The genesis of this project, and the Wonderland scenographic construct discussed throughout, was my initial research into the historic *Wonderland City* and *Pleasure Grounds* environs and their re-appropriation as 'beat' since their demise. The exploration then of 'beat' spaces as sites of queer time and space and how these spaces have been represented through various medial approaches became a particularly important focus of understanding the specific sites I explored through my Wonderland.

The inherent darkness associated with these illicit, temporal, queer spaces encouraged a further investigation into the methodology of darkness as a queer aesthetical strategy (Love, Brooks, Halberstam et al.). This exploration into how darkness could metaphorically, physically and conceptually be used to highlight issues of damage, trauma, violence and shame within the production and staging of my Wonderland series prompted a desire to understand how an audience may experience such work. In attempting to avoid the negative effect shame may have in the witnessing of art, I have drawn on Best's (2016) concept of reparative aesthetics as a means for highlighting how scenographic photography may be used to demonstrate the consequences of historic violence and trauma without necessarily evoking pity or shame. This resulted in my decision to use scenographic model-making as a tool with which to interrogate the chosen sites where the inherent 'wonder' and fascination associated with the art of the miniature allows for the possibility of a reparative reading not always possible with the explicit tradition of documentary photography of sites of trauma.

This presentation of these individual photographs within the larger and collective framework of scenographic photography allows the body of work to become, in the tradition of post-dramatic theatre and expanded scenography, a performed visual text able to be engaged with in ways similar to the Christian tradition of walking the 'Stations of the Cross'. Also in this exegesis, participants are invited to move through, pause, reflect and move on to elicit some form of empathic response to these Wonderland stations.

Throughout this exegesis and the presentation of my practice I have been conscious of my desire to introduce the neologism 'scenographic photography' into the creative arts lexicon. It is my desire to further this contribution to new knowledge through the ongoing public exhibition of work that explores the spatio-temporal qualities of this interdisciplinary artform. At the heart of this research, and future manifestations, is a strong personal mandate to strive to garner some societal awareness and understanding of the difficult and violent histories we live with. My writing and creative works presented are the beginnings of what will hopefully be an ongoing research journey that projects the concept of scenographic photography widely into the academic and artistic communities.

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